

EMINENT  
INDIAN WOMEN.

# EMINENT INDIAN WOMEN

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AMRIT VERMA



GREAT INDIAN PUBLISHERS  
New Delhi

Published by  
Great Indian Publishers .  
97, Pataudi House  
New Delhi-110001  
INDIA

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*Cover : B. Bhattacharya*

*Price : Rs. 35*

*Printed at*  
**Print Art,**  
Navin Shahdara,  
Delhi-110032

*There is no companion better than one's own wisdom;  
no conduct worthier than living with self respect.*

**—Avvaiyar**

## PREFACE

The 'Eminent Indian Women' presents real life sketches of the well known and some less known women—saints and seers, poets and philosophers, warriors and patriots, builders and scientists—who have added in no small measure to the making of composite history of India.

History precludes assessing the living personages and as such some of the present day personalities—Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indira Gandhi, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Sumati Morarjee, Mahadevi Verma, Ashapoorna Devi, Mani Behn Kara, Aruna Asafali who have become eminent during their life time—do not find place in the book. This methodology was earlier adopted by us in our '100 Great Indians Through The Ages.'

Also, some other great names namely, Shilabhattacharika, Yakshini Mahattara, Guna Sadhvi, Kanti, Unniarcha, Mrinalavati, Naikidevi, Sridevi, Lakshminimati, Chandravati, Balam-patti, Rani Jayamati, Ramabai Ranade, Lady Thackersey, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan etc do not figure in the work. This is for the reason that about the ancient ones information available is scanty and of the recent ones proper evaluation is wanting.

The sketches of the personalities have been presented in chronological order; they have not been grouped according to their sphere of work or contribution. One should be happy to note that these eminent women came from different parts, social strata and communities of India.

Controversies do no good; disputed facts have, therefore, been avoided as far as possible. Only about presentation of Mallinath, we would like to say a word. Exclusion of the great Jain saint, highly esteemed by both the schools (or sects)—Digambaras and Svetambaras—but considered by one as female and by the other as male, would have not been correct in our

view, and we have therefore written about the eminent person as a female but placed her under a distinct sub head Jain Hagiology.'

No assessment has so far been made of the impact of Indian women on national integration. This is our humble, constructive effort in that direction. We are sure that running through the pages readers will feel closeness and warmth for and sympathy with women who inspite of their suffering and handicaps of sorts acted in the interest of humanity and backed movements for its betterment.

Simple language and small sentences have been used for better communicability and comprehension and diacritical marks, which sometime render reading cumborsome, avoided. In the text proper names of ancient times have been spelt out as these are written with such marks and other names as are commonly used in books of history.

We are grateful to Mr. A. D. Pisharody and Mr. Virendra Singh Parmarth for their advice on women of ancient India, to Mr. R.K. Saiyed and Mr. Mujtaba Hussain for their observations on women of the Islamic and Moghul times, and to Mr. M.S. Natarajan and Mr. N. Srinivasan for their keen interest in women of Karnataka and Tamilnadu, respectively. We received assistance from our friends Mr. and Mrs. M.M. Wagle, Mr. P.K. Ghosh, Mr. F.C. Ahluwalia, Mr. G.V. Mohan and Mr. Neil Gokhale and our thanks to them. Thanks are also due to Mr. B. Bhattacharya for the cover design, to Smt. Ratna Mehra for assistance in lay out, and to Nishi and Kishori for their encouragement in our moments of despair in handling such a galaxy of talented women.

—H. N. Verma  
Amrit Verma

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**Prehistoric**

# Uma

Uma was the consort of the legendary Siva. She is associated with conjugal happiness.

Uma—her family name was Parvati—was born of Menaka and Himavat and grew up in luxury in the house of her parents who bestowed all their affection on their daughter. When Uma came of age, she learnt about Siva and decided to secure him as her husband. The parents, well aware of the eccentricities of Siva, tried to dissuade her from her goal. However, Parvati was firm and refused to abandon the goal. Finally, the parents conceded.

Himavat escorted the daughter to the mendicant's place. On way, they learnt from Rati that her husband Kamadeva was burnt alive by Siva's vision when the former had tried to distract Siva in penance. Even this tragic incident could not deflect Parvati and she begged of her father to leave her alone.

Parvati then sat down to perform penance and so austere was it that she would not touch even a leaf and was therefore called Aparna (i.e. without a leaf). When Menaka learnt of her daughter's plight, she was grieved and called on her. She was shocked to see her and cried out 'U-Ma' (Oh don't !), whence she was called 'Uma'.

Siva learnt of Parvati's resolve. He was pleased and owned her. Thereafter they led a contented life and begot two sons, Ganesha and Subrahmanyam. Parvati was considered an ideal wife; even today her blessings are sought by the newly-weds and she, with her husband Siva, is worshipped all over the country.

Uma is associated with Siva as his female energy (Shakti). Uma and Shakti are two aspects of the same reality. Uma, in two forms, one mild and the other fierce, has several names, referable to her various forms, attributes and actions. While in her mild form she is Devi, Uma, Gauri, Parvati, Bhavani

etc., in her terrible form she is Durga (the inaccessible), Kali, Chandi, Bhairavi (the terrible), Maha-Maya (great illusion) etc. In her fierce form she is offered sacrifices (often bloody ones) and the Tantrikas, to propitiate her, indulge in orgies. As Annapurna, she is nourisher and compassionate.

Durga, the beautiful, has ten arms. She is portrayed armed with weapons and riding menacingly on a tiger. Durga, may be, had to fight terrible battles against the Asuras and her triumphs, lauded by Suras, have been mentioned in the *Chandi-mahatmya*. As Kali, she is represented with a black skin, a hideous and terrible countenance dripping with blood, skulls hanging round her neck and 'in all respects resembling a fury rather than a goddess'. As Siva's Bhuta-nayaki, she is the leader of the goblins and as Gananayaki of the Ganas. She is also known as Kamakhya (called after Kama, desire).

She is divine in all that is feminine and feminine in whatever is divine. Parvati is said to have evolved 'Lasya' a delicate dance, in contrast to her husband's vigorous Tandava.

Uma has her parallels in the history of other ancient cultures. The Babylonian Ummu or Umma, the Accadian Ummi, and Dravidian Umma can be connected with each other and with Uma—all standing for the Mother Goddess. Thesup and Hepa of ancient Assyria resemble Siva and Uma. Only their vehicles differ. In place of the Assyrians' lion, Siva's vehicle is Nandi, the bull.

"The history of India is replete with the names of great men to whom, on account of their service to humanity, divinity was ascribed. One such is Siva's. A benefactor of mankind, he was marked out in time for his qualities and placed on the high pedestal of deity." Uma, as the consort of Siva as also in her own right, was acknowledged as a great person but her personality appears to have merged with that of her deity husband. "Firmness of love, steadfastness and tenacity are harmoniously adjusted in Uma. In her, romance loses itself in the depths of dedicated love, youth in age, passion in purity."

### *Reading*

Kalidasa : *Kumarasambhavam*

S.K. Dixit : *The Mother Goddess*

**Vedic**

# Ghoshā

The Vedic wisdom was revealed in hymns by great many seers, including 27 women known as Brahnavadinis of whom Ghoshā is the most outstanding.

Ghoshā was, according to the *Bṛihaddevata* (VII, 41-48), a daughter of Kakshivan and granddaughter of Dirghatmas, both great seers. An atmosphere of religion and philosophy pervaded their house. Ghoshā performed religious rites and discussed subtle problems of life and death, soul and God with the great seers of her time. She led an ideal life of spirituality and grew up in her own right to be a great seer.

Ghoshā, it appears from her hymns, suffered from some skin disease and the legend is that because of this disease, she failed to find a husband for herself and remained spinster. But this does not appear to be correct because from the hymns that she composed, it is inferred that she invoked Ashvins, her family physician deities known for curing the blind and the diseased, who were pleased and cured her of the disease, perhaps leprosy, and made her worthy of wedded happiness. She got married to some prince at the age of sixty ! The blessings of married life anticipated in her hymns lead one to conclude that she ought to have led a happy married life. Sayana refers to her son Suhastya who too composed a hymn. Another legend associates her with Arjuna as her husband. But this does not stand to reason because of the wide gap in their times.

Two hymns (39 and 40), each of 14 verses, in the 10th book of *Rig-Veda* are ascribed to her.

## Hymn 39

1. As it were the name of father, easy to invoke, we all assembled here to invoke this car of yours, Asvins, your swiftly-rolling circumambient car which he who worships must invoke at eve and dawn,



2. Awake all pleasant strains and let the hymns flow forth raise up abundant fulness. Asvins, bestow on us a glorious heritage and give our princes treasure fair as Soma is.
3. Ye are the bliss of her who groweth old at home, and helpers of the slow although he linger last. Men call you too, Nasatyas, healers of the blind, the thin and feeble, and the man with broken bones.
4. Ye made Chyavana, weak and worn with length of days, young again like a car, that had power to move. Ye lifted up the son of Tugra from the floods. At our libations must all these acts be praised.
5. We will declare among the folk your ancient deeds heroic. Yea, ye were physicians bringing health (to people). You must be lauded, will we bring for aid, so that this foe of ours, O Asvins, may believe.
6. Listen to me, O Asvins, I have cried to you. Give me your aid as sire and mother aid their son. Poor without kin or friend or ties of blood am I. Save me before it be too late, from this my curse.
7. Ye mounted on your chariot brought to Vimada the comely maid of Purumitra as a bride. Ye came unto the calling of the weakling's dame, and granted noble offspring to the happy wife.
8. Ye gave again the vigour of his life to the sage Kali when old age was coming nigh. Ye rescued Vandana and raised him from the pit, and in a moment gave Vispala power to move.
9. Ye Asvins Twain, endowed with manly strength, brought forth Rebha when hidden in the cave and well-nigh dead. Freed Saptavadhri, and for Atri caused the pit heated with fire to be pleasant resting place.
10. On Pedu ye bestowed, Asvins, a courser white, mighty with nine and ninety varied gifts of strength. A horse to be renowned, who bore his friend at speed, joy-giving. Bhaga-like to be invoked of men.
11. From no side, ye two kings whom none may check or stay, doth grief, distress, or danger come upon the man. Whom, Asvins, swift to hear borne on your glowing path. Ye with your consort make the foremost.

12. Come on that chariot which the Ribhus wrought for you, the chariot, Asvins, that is speedier than thought. At harnessing whereof heaven's daughter springs to birth and from Vivasvan come auspicious Night and Day.
13. Come, conquerors of the sundered mountain, to our home. Asvins who delivered even from the world's deep throat and set again at liberty he swallowed quail.
14. We have prepared this laud for you, O Asvins, and, like the Bhrgus, as a car had framed it. Have decked it as a maid to meet the bridegroom, and brought it as a son, our stay for ever.

### Hymn 40

1. Your radiant chariot—whither goes it on its way ? who decks it for you, Heroes, for its happy course, starting at day-break, visiting each morning every house, borne hitherward through prayer unto the sacrifice ?
2. Where are ye, Asvins, in the evening, where at morn : where is your halting place, where rest ye for the night ? Who brings you homeward, as the widow bedward draws her husband's brother as the bride attracts the groom.
3. Early ye sing forth praise as with a herald's voice, and, meet for worship, go each morning to the house. Whom do ye ever bring to ruin ? Unto whose libations come ye Heroes, like two sons of kings ?
4. Even as hunters follow two wild elephants, we with oblations call you down at morn and eve. To folk who pay you offerings at appointed times, Chiefs, Lords of splendour, ye bring food to strengthen them.
5. To you, O Asvins, came the daughter of a king, Ghosha, and said, O Heroes, this I beg of you : Be near me in the day, be near me in the night, help me to gain a car-borne chieftain rich in steeds.
6. O Asvins, ye are wise : as Kutsa comes to men, bring your car nigh the folk of him who sings your praise. The bee, O Asvins, bears your honey in her mouth as the maid carries it purified in her hand.
7. To Bhajyu and to Vasa ye came near with help. O Asvins, to Singra and to Usana, your worshipper secures your friendship for himself, through your protection I

- desire felicity.
8. Krisa and Sayu ye protect, ye Asvins Twain : ye two assist the widow and the worshipper. And, ye throw open Asvins unto those who win the cattle stall that thunders with its seven-fold mouth.
  9. The woman hath brought forth, the infant hath appeared. The plants of wondrous beauty straightway have sprung up. To him the rivers run as down a deep descent, and he this day becomes their master and their lord.
  10. They mourn the living, cry aloud, at sacrifice. The men have set their thoughts upon a distant cast. A lovely thing for fathers who have gathered here, a joy to husbands are the wives, their arms shall clasp.
  11. Of this we have no knowledge. Tell it forth to us, now the youth rests within the chambers of the bride. Fain would we reach the dwelling of the vigorous steer who love the kine, O Asvins ! This is our desire.
  12. Your favouring grace hath come, ye Lords of ample wealth. Asvins, our longings are stored up within your hearts. Ye, Lords of splendour, have become our two-fold guard. May we as welcome friends reach Aryaman's abode.
  13. Even so, rejoicing in the dwelling place of man, give her sons and riches to the eloquent. Make a ford, Lords of splendour, where men well may drink, remove the spiteful tree-stump standing in the path.
  14. O Asvins, wonder workers, Lord of lustre, where and what folk do ye delight yourselves today ? Who hath detained them with him ? Whither are they gone ? Unto what sage's or what worshipper's abode ?

Ralph T.H. Griffith : *Hymns of the Rig-Veda*  
 S.R. Shastri : *Women in the Vedic Age*

**Upanishadic**

# Gargi

In a philosophic congress convened by king Janaka of Videha to celebrate an Ashvamedha (horse-sacrifice), great many teachers came to participate in the discourse on the all-pervading and eternal Atman. Amongst the participants, Yajnavalkya proved matchless and silenced eminent scholars who acknowledged his superiority in learning. But then a woman named Gargi, daughter of sage Vachaknu (after him known as Vachaknavi) and a philosopher of repute, came forward and challenged Yajnavalkya.

Gargi said, "As a heroic youth from Kashi or Videha bends his unbent bow and takes two deadly arrows in his hand, I have armed myself against thee O Yajnavalkya, with two questions, which solve for me."

Yajnavalkya consented, on which Gargi asked :

"The layer that is above the sky and below the earth, which is described as being situated between the earth and the sky and which is indicated as the symbol of the past, present and future, where is that situated ?"

"The layer of air is situated in the ether."

Gargi replied : "Salutations unto thee, O Yajnavalkya. Thou hast answered well my question. Now prepare for the other. Where is that ether pervading ?"

"Gargi, it is in the region of the Gandharvas."

"Where is that region located ?"

"It is in the realm of the sun."

"Where again is that (situated) ?"

"Gargi, it is in the region of the moon."

"Where is that again ?"

"It is in the region of the stars."

"Where is that region located ?"

"Gargi, it is in the region of the gods ?"

"Where is that region of the gods ?"

"It is in the world of Indra."

"Where is that world of Indra situated?"

"It is in the world of Prajapati."

"Where is that region of Prajapati situated?"

"It is in the world of Brahman, O Gargi."

"Where is that world of Brahman?"

"O Gargi, ask me not any more; thou art asking that which is not to be asked. Cease thy queries, lest thy head drop down dead on the floor."

He added, "O Gargi, what you are asking, the Brahmins designate it as Akshara. It is neither big nor small; neither short nor long; nor red, nor wet, nor shaded, nor covered with darkness; neither air nor sky; neither attached (to anything), nor (does it) consist of juices, smell, eyes, ears, speech, mind, prowess, life and mouth; nor can it be measured, nor has it the inner (cavity) nor the outer; neither can it be eaten nor does anybody eat it. The sun and the moon are regulated by the order of that Akshara Brahman; the earth and the sky are transfixed by him; the minutes and seconds, days and nights, half-months and months, seasons and years are regulated by the layer of this Akshara; rivers from the white mountains flowing to the east and those flowing to the west are following their courses by the order of this Akshara. He who departs from the world without knowing this Akshara is to be pitied, on the other hand, one who departs from this world knowing this Akshara is a Brahman.

"O Gargi! this Akshara is imperceptible, but perceives all; hears himself though not heard by others; thinks of all though himself is beyond the realisation of others; himself knows all but is unknowable to others as he is beyond the intellect of any person. Besides this Akshara, there is none that sees, none that hears, none that thinks, none that knows. It is imperishable Brahman who is pervading this sky."

Gargi, satisfied with the answer, after duly saluting Yajnavalkya left the assembly.

Gargi's name figures amongst the greatest men and women of Brahmajajna, a great event. We have no information about her marital status.

Dr. Barua : *Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy*

Shakuntala Rao Shastri : *Women in Vedic Age*

# Maitreyi

"Will all this wealth make me immortal ?" enquired Maitreyi of her husband Yajnavalkya, the famous sage and philosopher.

Yajnavalkya had two wives, Maitreyi and Katyayani. Whereas the former was conversant with Brahman, the latter possessed the knowledge ordinary women have. At a ripe age the sage decided to renounce the world and embrace the monastic ideal. He announced, "Maitreyi ! I leave this house. Let me make a settlement between thee and Katyayani." Maitreyi, possessed of an inquisitive mind and learned in other-worldly matters, posed to her husband the question, "My lord if this entire earth, full of wealth, belonged to me, tell me, should it make me immortal ?".

Yajnavalkya replied that with the riches her life would become comfortable like that of other rich people though there was no hope of immortality through wealth. Maitreyi said, "What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal ? May you please tell me what you know of immortality." Yajnavalkya loved Maitreyi and he proceeded to explain his Doctrine of the Atman thus :

"The husband is dear to the wife not for the husband's sake, but for the sake of Atman. Similarly is the wife dear to the husband not for her sake, but for the sake of the Atman. So also sons, wealth, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, gods, Vedas and the universe are all dear not on their own account but for sake of self."

"The self is truth we should comprehend, should reflect upon, O Maitreyi ! He who has seen, heard, comprehended and known the self, by him this entire universe is known...From this great being were breathed forth, like clouds of smoke from fire kindled with damp fuel, the Vedas and other subjects of knowledge, nay, food and drink, even this world, and the other world and all creatures. As all waters have their meeting place

in the sea, all touch in the skin, all tastes in the tongue, all odours in the nose, all colours in the eye, all sounds in the ear, all precepts in the mind, all knowledge in the heart, all actions in hands, all movements in the feet, and all the Vedas in speech; as a mass of salt has neither inside nor outside but altogether is mass of taste, thus indeed, has that Self neither inside nor outside, but is altogether a mass of knowledge."

Maitreyi replied, 'Sir, here you have bewildered me.' Yajnavalkya said, "There is nothing to bewilder; for when there is duality, one sees the other, one smells the other, one hears the other, one perceives the other, one knows the other, but when the self only is all this, how should he smell the other, how should he see, hear or salute another? That self is to be described by 'not that'. He is incomprehensible, imperishable, unattached, unfettered, so how should he know the knower? Thus far goes immortality."

Having said this Yajnavalkya went away into the forest.

A wife in the Vedic times contributed to the development of her husband's personality. There can be no doubt that Maitreyi too should have added substantially to the personality of the great sage as well as to the richness of his thoughts.

R. K. Mookerji : *Men and Thought in Ancient India*



**Ramayana**

# Sita

Epic characters are large-sized; many of them symbolical and some just mythical. Was Sita, the heroine of the most popular epic, Ramayana, a real person or a figment of imagination?

According to the Ramayana, Sita was the daughter of Janaka, the king of the Videhas, in north Bihar, and married to Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, after he broke the bow of Siva in a Swayamvar. When the question of succession arose, Rama, in obedience to his father Dasarath, prepared to leave Ayodhya for 14 years. Sita refused to be left behind and accompanied her husband and his younger brother Lakshmana. One day when the brothers were absent from their abode, Ravana forcibly abducted Sita. In the famous Rama-Ravana Yuddha that ensued Rama killed Ravana and Sita rejoined her husband after considerable suffering in Ravana's prison. They returned to Ayodhya where they were welcome and Rama ascended the throne. They lived happily till one day a subject cast aspersion on Sita's character. Rama sent her (even though she was in the family way) to the forest where she took shelter in Valmiki's *ashram* and gave birth to Lava and Kusha. Later, to prove her purity, she entered the earth.

Sita had a two-fold motto : "She would, as she herself said to the Rakshasis, ever remain devoted to Rama. She would also sacrifice all her comforts, rights, and privileges, including the company of Rama, and willingly undergo personal humiliation, if thereby Rama could be held up before the world as an ideal king, noted for his power, purity, truthfulness and sense of justice. All glory was to be his, and the necessary sacrifices hers."

Prof Weber observes :

In the Ramayana we find ourselves from the very outset in the

region of allegory and we only move upon historical ground in so far as the allegory is applied to an historical fact, viz. to spread the Aryan civilization to the South, more especially to Ceylon. The characters are not historical figures but merely personification of certain occurrences and situations. Sita, in the first place, whose abduction by a giant demon, Ravana, and her subsequent recovery by her husband Rama constitute the plot of the entire poem, is but the *field-furrow* to whom divine honours were paid in the songs of *Rik* and in the *Grhya* ritual. She accordingly represents Aryan husbandry which was to be protected by Rama—whom I regard as originally identical with Balaram ('*Halavrit*', the *plough bearer*) though the two were afterwards separated against the attacks of the predatory aborigines. These latter appear to be demons and giants; whereas those natives who were well disposed towards the Aryan civilization were represented as monkeys—a comparison which was doubtless not exactly intended to be flattering and which rests on the striking ugliness of the Indian aborigines as compared with Aryan race.

There is a controversy about the very genuineness and historicity of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as also about the incidents and characters of the two epics, and doubts have been expressed whether there ever lived on earth a person like Sita.

To cite another historian, R.C. Dutt :

The *Ramayana* is literally valueless as 'a narrative of historical events and incidents. The heroes are myths, pure and simple. Sita, the field-furrow, had received divine honours from the time of the *Rig-Veda* and has been worshipped as a goddess. When civilization gradually spread towards southern India, it was not difficult to invent a poetical myth that Sita was carried to the South. And when this goddess and woman—the noblest creation of human imagination—had acquired a distinct and lovely individuality, she was naturally described as the daughter of the holiest and most learned king on record, Janaka of the Videhas.

But who is Rama, described as Sita's husband and the king of the Koshas? The later Puranas tell us he was an incarnation of Vishnu—but Vishnu himself had not risen to prominence at the time of which we are speaking. Indra was the chief of the gods in the Epic period. In the Sutra literature we learn that Sita, the furrow goddess, is the wife of Indra. Is it then an uneniable conjecture that Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, is in his original conception like Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, only a new edition of the Indra of the *Rig-Veda*, battling with the demons of drought? The myth of Indra has thus been mixed up with the epic which describes a historical war in Northern India, and the epic which describes the historic conquest of Southern India?

Prof. Jacobi, another Indologist, says,

The foundation of the Ramayana would be a celestial myth of the Veda transformed into a narrative of earthly adventures according to a not uncommon development. Sita can be traced to the Rig-Veda where she appears as the furrow personified and invoked as a goddess. In some of the Grihya-sutras, she again appears as a genius of the plough field, is praised as a being of great beauty and is accounted the wife of Indra or Parjanya, the rain god. There are traces of this in the Ramayana itself. For Sita is represented, as having emerged from the earth when her father Janaka was once ploughing and at last disappears underground in the arms of the goddess Earth. Her husband Rama would be no other than Indra, and his conflict with Ravana would represent the Indra-Vritra myth of the Rig-Veda. This identification is confirmed by the name of Ravana's son being Indrajit or Indrasuta, the latter being actually an epithet in the Rig-Veda. Ravana's most notable feat, the rape of Sita, was its prototype in the stealing of the cows recovered by Indra. Hanumat, the chief of the monkeys and Rama's ally in the recovery of Sita, is the son of the wind god with the patronymic Marut and is described as a flying human through the air to find Sita. Hence in this figure perhaps survives a reminiscence of Indra's alliance with the Maruts in his conflict with Vritra and his dog sarama who as Indra's messenger crosses the waters of the Rasa and tracks the cows occurs as the name of the demoness who consoles Sita in her captivity.

Despite all this, it remains a fact that Sita has over the centuries been considered as an ideal wife and she is one of the Five Virgins. Of the five, three Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari were Sita's contemporary. The fifth one Draupadi was a Pandava queen.

V. S. Srinivasa Sastry : *Thirty Lectures on Ramayana* .

# Ahalya

Ahalya was the wife of Rishi Sharadvat Gautama. As her name, composed of two words 'A' and 'Halya' together meaning 'without any blemish', shows, she was a matchless beauty and was so named by Brahma, her god-father.

Once when Ahalya was young, Brahma left her in the custody of the sage Gautama. He looked after her well and gave her back, pure and unsullied, to Brahma. Highly pleased with the virtuous conduct, Brahma gave Ahalya in marriage to Gautama. The sage continued his ascetic practice as before.

Indra, a pupil of Gautama, was infatuated with Ahalya's beauty and he schemed to entice her with the assistance of Chandrama. Indra one night heralded the dawn by crowing like a cock which woke up Gautama. The sage as usual went out for his morning duties. Indra was waiting for this opportune moment and entered into the house.

To Ahalya Indra posed as Gautama come back on realising that it was yet the dead of the night, and he slept with her. While the two were still in embrace, the Rishi Gautama announced his return. Ahalya now realised that she had been duped. Finding Indra there, Gautama cursed Ahalya, "You will lose your beauty and youth", and told Indra that he would have a hideous body. Distraught at this, she explained to the sage that she had been duped and begged for his mercy. But unable to take back the curse, the sage told her, "You will be cleansed of your sin by your hospitality to Rama."

Years passed by. Then Rama came and may be he brought reconciliation between Gautama and Ahalya, estranged and separated for good many years. She was considered pure and chaste. Their son Satananda adorned the court of Janaka.

Some scholars view 'Ahalya' as an allegory. 'Ahalya' also means 'barren land' which south of the Vindhyas became fertile after the visit of Rama.

**Mahabharata**

# Sarmishtha

Sarmishtha was the daughter of Asura king Vrishaparvan. She had a friend named Devayani who was the only daughter of Shukracharya, the priest of the Asura king.

Once Devayani and Sarmishtha went out on a pleasure trip. They took bath in a well. After the bath, Devayani by mistake put on Sarmishtha's clothes which enraged the princess. She stripped Devayani and cast her into the well. The latter cried helplessly but to no avail till king Yayati, passing that way on a hunting expedition, heard her sobs. He rescued her from the well and gave her his upper garment to wear.

Feeling grateful to the rescuer, Devayani offered herself in marriage to Yayati. She told him that Kacha, Brahaspati's son, had cursed her that she would marry a Kshatriya. Satisfied with the explanation, Yayati agreed to marry Devayani.

On return to her house, Devayani narrated the incident to her father, Shukracharya, who got angry and decided to leave the king's palace. But determined not to let the priest go away in anger, the king expressed his regrets and went so far as to agree to his Purohit's demand that Sarmishtha serve Devayani as a maid servant.

Sometime afterwards Devayani was married to Yayati, and Sarmishtha joined the couple as a maid. She served Devayani faithfully and looked after Yayati well when the queen was in the family way. But Yayati exploited Sarmishtha for no fault of hers. On knowing of it, Devayani left Yayati for her father's house. Apprehending trouble, Yayati followed his wife. Shukracharya was angry and cursed Yayati to fall a prey to old age. Yayati professed deep love for Devayani and appealed to his father-in-law to mitigate the curse. Satisfied with his apologies, Shukracharya

condescended and said that if some one gave Yayati his youth and took on his old age, he would regain his youth. Puru, Yayati's son from Sarmishtha, agreed to give his youth to his father. The king then regained his youth and enjoyed the company of Devayani.

Sarmishtha's story is a pointer of close relations between the Aryans of India and the Asuras of Iran and of the not so die-hard a caste system then prevalent in India. 'Strength of character, self control, spirit of self-sacrifice and implicit obedience to her father have elevated Sarmishtha to the position of an ideal woman.'

### *Mahabharata*



# Savitri

Savitri, in India, is the connotation of ideal wife.

Savitri was the daughter of Ashwapati, the king of the *Madras*, a community that then lived in the Punjab. She received good education and grew up to be an accomplished princess. But this accomplishment proved a hindrance to her marriage as no eligible bachelor would dare approach her for fear he would not match her. In his wisdom, Ashwapati, therefore, left it to the princess to find out a suitable match for herself.

Savitri once went about the country-side and one day while passing through a forest saw a young, strong and handsome man, carrying an axe in his hand and a bundle of wood on shoulder. At the very first sight, Savitri liked Satyavan who, she learnt, was the son of a king treacherously deprived of his throne by enemies and, fallen on bad days, lived in the jungle. Savitri made up her mind to secure Satyavan as her husband.

Savitri, on return to the royal court, told her father of her choice of Satyavan for her husband. The king did not think high of a wood cutter for his daughter's hand and tried to persuade her to change her mind. But she was firm. The sage Narada who happened to be in the court predicted that Satyavan would die on the last day of the coming year. This too could not deflect her from her chosen path and she conveyed her decision to her parents.

Finally, reluctantly though, Ashwapati consented to give Savitri in marriage to Satyavan. The king took his daughter to the place of Satyavan and the marriage was solemnized. Savitri was well received by her husband and his aged parents. By her devotion and service, Savitri won over them and they lived a very happy life.

Savitri, reminded of Narada's forecast, counted each day

and kept a close watch over the period. When only three days were left for the year to come to a close, she fasted and on the last day accompanied her husband to the woods. Hardly had Satyavan started chopping off wood that he complained of intense pain in the chest and felt he was on the verge of death. Savitri retained her poise and attended to her husband. And, so perfect was her devotion that Satyavan came back from the jaws of death, perhaps with the aid of herbs about which Savitri was quite knowledgeable.

The story in the Mahabharata is poetic. The narrative goes that satyavan died and Yama, the god of death, came to fetch him. While Savitri let Yama do so, she followed him. And, much though Yama tried to dissuade her, she continued to follow him. The latter was so pleased that he granted her three boons, including one that she may beget children from Satyavan. She pointed out to Yama that she could not get children unless Satyavan was alive. To keep his promise, Yama revived Satyavan to life. Savitri thus became an ideal wife.

Today if a woman is to be applauded for her chastity, they say she is a Sati-Savitri. And, if she is to be taunted at for her feigned morales, they say 'What a Sati-Savitri !'

C. Rajagopalachari : *Mahabharata*

# Radha

A vast mass of legends has gathered around Radha and Krishna, one of the most popular and celebrated pair in Indian mythology. The love story has invested their characters with a degree of mysticism; Radha has been interpreted as the soul that encircles Krishna, the Lord, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. For the religious minded the soul cries out, "Lord, my love, ever kind and restless in drawing me, your devotee, away from danger, when shall you be in the field of my vision."

Radha came of a peasant family of Gokul, near Mathura ruled by Kansa. She was born on the eighth day (Ashtami) of Bhadra Shukla *paksha*, daughter of Vrishabhanu and Kalavati. Radha grew up in the company of other peasant boys and girls, prominent among whom was Krishna (Vasudeva) of the family of Nanda and Yashoda. Krishna's tantrums brought him closer to Radha and the two developed fondness for each other. She was enchanted by his play on the flute and often the *gopas* and *gopis* indulged in innocent frolic.

The dream came to an end when Krishna and his brother Balaram had to leave for Mathura never to come back to their village. After ending the tyrannous rule of Kansa and killing him, Krishna moved his seat to Dwaraka, in Gujarat. Radha suffered the pangs of separation for her sportive beloved throughout her life. Once remembering his *gopis* and *gopas*, Krishna sent his bosom friend Uddhava with a message to Radha but its philosophic content failed to console the love torn Radha. (According to one source, Radha was married to one Rapan). Radha had treasured memories of Krishna's company, especially in Rasa, the well known dance.

At Dwaraka, Krishna took Rukmini as his wife. Though Krishna did not marry Radha, his name is associated with Radha's—Radha as *the* consort of Krishna. This is a unique instance of a 'girl', who ditched by his 'boy friend' deprived the

latter's wife of her legitimate status. It is Radha and Krishna that figure everywhere. Only in the form of Vitthala, Krishna has Rukmini with him.

Nimbarkacharya started a sect in Vrindavan and later in the 15th Century Vallabhacharya propagated his cult of *Bala Lila* of Radha-Krishna. Chaitanya too was deeply affected by Radha-Krishna. Radha's devotion, has influenced innumerable people, including poets and artists who have written, sung and painted the love-lore of Radha and Krishna.

# Draupadi

Draupadi, daughter of king Drupad of Panchala and wife of the five Pandava princes, is known as one of the Five Virgins and "the embodiment of courage, fortitude, sense and sensibility, and even pride and prejudice."

Draupadi was a beautiful princess. When Drupad organised a swayamvara for his daughter's marriage, a large number of princes turned up. But to the envy of many, Arjuna, a Pandava prince in disguise, won her hand by hitting a moving target. He, with his four brothers, brought her to their house and informed mother Kunti of having made a great acquisition. Rather than showing curiosity about the acquisition, she asked them to share it among themselves, knowing little that her command would create a difficult situation, for how could a woman be shared by five men. King Drupad refused to approve of it. The problem was, however, settled by the sage Vyasa who said, "Let her become the wife of all the brethren". Thus Draupadi became the common wife of the five Pandavas, namely Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. It was so arranged that she would stay successively for 72 days in the house of each of the five Pandavas and that none else but the master of the house would enter while Draupadi was in the house.

When Yudhishtira received half the empire and started ruling from Indraprastha, Draupadi proved a capable companion and an ideal mistress of the household. But the jealous Kauravas trapped Yudhishtira in a gambling match in which he lost his all—his kingdom, his brothers, himself and even Draupadi—to the Kauravas. In the elders' assembly she protested—how could a man, Yudhishtira, who had lost himself and was not free, stake somebody else—and asked for justice and protection. But except hanging their heads in shame, the elders kept silent. Not only that Dushasana, a younger

Kaurava, emboldened by the behaviour of the elders, tried to strip Draupadi off her clothes. But as soon as a garment fell from her body, she was miraculously seen with a fresh garment on. Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, audaciously invited her to sit on his thigh. This distressed Bhima who vowed that he would drink the blood of Dushasan and smash the thigh of Duryodhana. Draupadi vowed that her hair would remain dishevelled till Bhima should tie these up with his hands dripping with the blood of Dushasana. In consequence of the gambling, the Pandavas and Draupadi were to go into exile for 12 years, after which they were to dwell incognito for one year. After 13 years they were at liberty to return.

For 12 years the Pandavas remained in the jungle and Draupadi acted as the ideal mistress of the household. In the thirteenth year, under assumed names, the Pandavas and Draupadi entered the service of the king of Virata. Draupadi took up the job of a waiting-maid to the Virata queen and lived a quiet life for a while. But her beauty excited the passions of Kichaka, the queen's brother. Bhima avenged the insult by killing Kichaka. After the term of exile was over, Draupadi asked the Pandavas to avenge the humiliation and complained to her cousin Krishna of the indignity she had to bear at the hands of the Kauravas. All efforts to bring about reconciliation between the Kauravas and the Pandavas having failed, there ensued the famous 18-day Great Battle at Kurukshetra. The Kauravas and their allies were defeated. But on the last day of the battle all the five sons of Draupadi (one each from five Pandavas) were cut down in the Pandava camp by Aswatthama whose father had lost life at the Pandava's hands. Arjuna pursued the killer but spared his life after taking from him a celebrated jewel. This he gave to Bhima for presentation to Draupadi. She in turn presented it to Yudhishtira, the head of the family.

The Pandavas ruled for years and then went to the Himalayas with Draupadi. She was the first to fall on the journey.

Draupadi's name was Krishna. She was also known as Panchali, Sairindhri, Panchami and Nitayauvana. For the Pandavas, she proved like an energy and constantly reminded them to avenge the humiliation.

C. Rajagopalachari : *Mahabharata*

## **Jain Hagiology**

# Mallinath

One of the greatest women who led a pious life and influenced the people is Mallinath, the nineteenth Arhat in the long succession of 24 Tirthankaras of the Jain hagiology. Mallinath is rather an unusual name for a woman ; it sounds like a man's. But for the saint who was spiritual minded and made no distinction between man and woman, the name was of no consequence. Many flocked to her in search of peace and solace and perhaps it was her disciples who, finding in their *guru* understanding and catholicity of outlook, gave Malli, which was her original name, the name 'Mallinath'.

Malli was born the daughter of king Kumbha, of Mithila, and Padmavati. She grew to be exceedingly beautiful and learned, and her fame travelled far and wide and attracted princes of Anga, Kashi, Koshala, Kunala, Kuru and Panchala. They all sought her hand. But finding none equal to his daughter, Kumbha refused to give Malli to any one of them. Enraged at this, the six attacked Mithila and laid a siege. Although Kumbha fought valiantly but it was an unequal match. Seeing her father on the verge of defeat, Malli requested him to invite the princes to meet her in her apartment. The king acted likewise.

Earlier, having sensed the catastrophe, Malli had got installed a beautiful golden statue of herself on a gorgeous jewelled platform in an interior room in the palace. The room had six doors with double doors and lattices in the front wall of the statue's private room and six little private rooms in the front of the doors, and one door in the wall behind the statue. Daily she threw a ball of food into the statue's palate and covered it with the golden lotus.

When the six princes came and saw the statue of Malli through the lattices in the doors; they were taken aback by the charming figure. But they were soon disillusioned when the



real Malli, more beautiful, entered by the door at the back of the statue and took off the lotus covering the statue's palate. The odour of the putrid food hurt their nostrils and the princes turned away.

Giving the analogy of the golden statue, Malli told them that beneath the external charm of body lies a filthy matter of transitory nature. Malli made the princes realise that the way to genuine happiness lay not in enjoyment but in meditation and practice of austerity. The princess herself gave up the royal comforts and became an ascetic. Her austere living attracted the princes and ordinary men and women who bowed to her and became her followers. By her excellent conduct, she was acknowledged as a Tirthankar.

In a sermon to a congregation, Mallinath advised :

"The boundless ocean of worldly existence grows of itself very much from love, et cetera, like the ocean from the day of full moon. The dirt of love and hate is destroyed at once for men who plunge into the water of tranquility which produces great joy. Men who have adopted tranquility destroy *karma* in half a moment which they would not destroy by severe penance in crores of births. The monk, who has complete understanding of the soul, divides *karma* and the soul, which are joined by the splinter of tranquility. When the destruction of the darkness of love, et cetera has been by the rays of tranquility, Yogis see the true nature of the supreme soul in themselves."

Malli died at a ripe age after a fast at Mt. Sammatta.

*Trisastishalakapurushacharitra*

**Ancient**

# Mahaprajapati Gotami

(6th Cen. B.C.)

Mahaprajapati Gotami was the second queen of Siddodhana, the Sakya king of Kapilavastu, and younger sister of Mahamaya, the chief queen. When Mahamaya died after giving birth to Siddhartha, Mahaprajapati nursed the child as her own, and entrusted the care of her own children, Nanda and Sundarinanda, to the nurses.

History is silent how Mahaprajapati reacted to Gotama's renunciation. She should have certainly been emotionally upset. But she would have been happy about his enlightenment and for years should have cherished the desire of meeting the enlightened soul she had brought up. Later when in his wanderings Buddha visited Rajagriha, she persuaded Siddodhana to invite him. Envoy after envoy was despatched, with instructions to request the Buddha to come to Kapilavastu, but each time an envoy called upon Gotama, the latter converted the former and each time the envoy failed to deliver Siddodhana's message. This happened nine times. The tenth time, the envoy became a monk but delivered the king's message to Buddha. Considerate, the Tathagata left for Kapilavastu on the advent of spring and reached there in two months' time. He converted his father and other family members to his order. The ladies of the palace, including Mahaprajapati Gotami, called on him to pay their respects.

Buddha's message and teachings had made inroads in the huts and the palaces, among men and women. Yet Buddha did not like women to give up their homes. Therefore, when after Siddodhana's death, Mahaprajapati and other dejected women with clipped hair and in yellow robes met Buddha at Vaishali and prayed for acceptance as disciples, the Buddha denied them the permission.

"It would be well, O Lord, if women should be allowed to renounce their homes and enter the homeless state and

follow the discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata," pleaded Gotami.

"Enough, O Gotami ! Let it not please thee that women should be allowed to do so," Buddha replied.

Gotami made the same request a second time, but Buddha did not relent. Depressed, she departed from his presence in tears. However, she did not give up her efforts and met Ananda, a respected monk and follower of Buddha. To his enquiry why she was dejected, Mahaprajapati replied that the Blessed One did not permit women to become nuns. Ananda took up thier cause and pleaded with the Buddha. "Are women, O lord ! capable when they have gone forth from the household life and entered the homeless state under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Blessed One ? Are they capable of realising the fruit of conversion, or the Second Path, or the Third Path or of Arhatship ?"

Buddha answered, "They are capable, Ananda. If then Mahaprajapati Gotami takes upon herself the eight chief rules, let her take that as her initiation."

That is how Mahaprajapati Gotami obtained for the women the right of renunciation of the world. She took to meditational exercises and attained perfection. She set up the Buddhist Order of nuns which gave shelter to many suffering women and it was due to her that innumerable women got solace.

Buddha did not show any special consideration to Mahaprajapati. Once he declined to accept a present specially made by her. But Buddha paid her special visits when she was on death bed. *Therigatha* attributes to Mahaprajapati Gotami the authorship of a few *gathas*. She practised the eight-fold path to the end of her worldly existence. She died at the age of 120.

# Amrapali

(6-5th Cen. B. C.)

"With all her beauty which enslaves even kings and princes, she also possesses great calm and steadfastness. Women of such character are in truth difficult to find in the world," thus spoke Buddha of Amrapali, a courtesan of Vaishali.

Amrapali was an exquisitely beautiful and talented girl found by Mahanama, a wealthy Sakyan merchant of Vaishali, in his pleasure garden, which explains her name. She blossomed into youth and learnt the 64 arts. Her fame spread far and wide and many suitors, including princes, potentates and rich merchants sought her hand. But none came up to her expectations. Disgusted with the visitors, Mahanama brought the matter before the Lichchhavi *gana*. The *gana* saw her and decided that the charming young woman was *striratna* (jewel of a woman) and should be the property of the *gana* and not of an individual.

This was really not a very attractive proposition. But Amrapali agreed to lead the life of a public woman, provided five privileges were given her. These were : (i) she be given a house in a locality inhabited by the nobles ; (ii) only one person could enter her premises at one time ; (iii) her fee would be 500 *karshapana*; (iv) her house could be searched on the seventh day in case of a general search for an enemy or culprit, and (v) there should be no restriction or watch over her visitors. The *gana* agreed to these conditions and Amrapali abided by their decision.

Kings and nobles visited Amrapali in her new apartments. Once king Bimbisar of Magadha visited her and from him she begot a son named Vimala Kondanna who later enjoyed a high position in the royal court. She amassed great riches and owned a beautiful mango-grove at Kotagrama. Once Buddha, during one of his wanderings, was attracted by the cool and

quiet of the mango-grove and camped there. When Amrapali heard of this, she went to the Buddha and paid her respects to the Tathagat. Pleased with her, Buddha taught her the Dharma which destroyed all her desires and purified her heart. She requested the Lord to accept alms next day from her at her place. The Tathagat signified his assent by silence.

Soon afterwards rich young merchants called on Buddha and invited him for a meal. But Buddha was already committed to Amrapali and they failed to persuade him to cancel his programme of dining at Amrapali's. They then went to her and pleaded, "Amrapali give up the meal for a hundred thousand." To which she replied, 'My lords, were you to offer all Vaishali with all its subject territory, I would not give up the meal.'

The next day Buddha, with his disciples, visited her house. She served the congregation with meals and offered all her possessions to the Sangha. Buddha accepted her offerings. Her son Vimala then gave a discourse. She was so much impressed that she became a Bhikshuni. After sometime Buddha left Vaishali but she continued to serve the poor and miserable. She had a monastery erected for the monks and tried to achieve purity of thought and conduct and attained *arhatahood*. She expressed herself in verses.

In her youth Amrapali had followed the low profession but later she was able to reform her life. Truly Buddha said, "whosoever looks upon his fault as a fault, and rightfully confesses it, shall in the future attain to self-restraint."

Rhys Davids : *Buddhist India*

# Kripi

(4th Cen. B.C.)

Kripi, or Cleophes, as she was referred to by the Greeks, was perhaps the world's only woman ruler to give Alexander the Great a battle. And, unless the Greeks were struck by her valour, they would not have bothered to mention her name.

Kripi was closely related to Ashmaka (or Assakenos as the Greeks called him), the ruler of the Swat-Buner region with capital at Massaga, near the famous Malakand Pass.

After Alexander had settled his scores with Darius of Persia, he moved towards India. But the going for the Greek hero was not easy; he had to contend with small principalities. When he approached the Swat-Buner region, he had to wage a battle against Ashmaka. Unfortunately Ashmaka was killed on the ground. But the heroic Queen Kripi (it is not known whether she was Ashmaka's mother or wife) kept the flag high. She ruled the city and the realm and defended valiantly her territory from the invaders.

Kripi was a brave and capable leader. But her subjects were not so sure of their own capability. They vacillated—whether to join the battle or not. However, she infused heroic spirit amongst the womanfolk who took to arms. Shamed at their cowardice, the men now came forward and preferring death to dishonour, they fought against the dreaded enemy. The enemy kept pressure and in a skirmish Kripi was overpowered and taken prisoner. This unnerved her men. Some fled for life and many were put to sword.

What is so noteworthy is the courage and spirit Kripi showed in an odd situation. After her capture, "Alexander fell in love with the Indian princess Cleophile" as she has been portrayed in Jean Racine's drama.

A. L. Basham : *History of India*

*Alexander's Expedition Down the Hydaspes & The Indus to the Indian Ocean*

# Sanghamitra

(282 B.C.—?)

Sanghamitra, the daughter of the great king Ashoka, is in her own right a great personality. She carried the Buddhist message of peace and humaneness from India across the seas and the torch of truth and love lighted by her and her brother Mahendra burns to this day in Sri Lanka.

Sanghamitra was born in 282 B.C., of Devi, the daughter of a merchant of Vidisha, and Ashoka, then viceroy of the *Mauryan empire at Vidisha*. She was the second child of her parents, two years younger to her brother Mahendra. Both the brother and the sister were influenced by their father and decided to dedicate their lives to the cause of Buddhism.

In 268 B. C. Sanghamitra was married to Agni-Brahma, perhaps her cousin, and the next year they begot a son who was named Sumana. Agni-Brahma was ordained in 266 B. C. Two years later when a teacher told Ashoka, "He alone is true friend of the Dharma who can dedicate his children to it," the king asked Mahendra and Sanghamitra, "Be you prepared to take the vow of life long honesty, chastity and service to the world?" The two replied, "It would be a great destiny for us if we could be instrumental in spreading the message of universal love as taught by Lord Buddha. If you will give us permission we will observe the order and achieve the end and purpose of human life."

Mahendra and Sanghamitra were then ordained by Acharya Ayupala and were named Dharmapala and Ayupali, respectively. She renounced the world and entered the Sangha as a member.

Mahendra and Sanghamitra helped in spreading Buddhism. When in 252 B. C. Ashoka sent a mission under Mahendra and Sumana to the court of Devanampriya Tissa of Sri Lanka, the latter reciprocated the gesture by sending a mission to Pataliputra. In Sri Lanka a large population became



Buddha's follower. Princess Anula and her 500 companions decided to renounce their homes. To meet the exigency, at Mahendra's request and Tissa's express desire, Ashoka sent his daughter Sanghamitra, with a branch of Bodh-tree, to instruct the women of Sri Lanka about Buddhism. And, it is to her credit that she devoted her entire life to the cause. She helped Mahendra in the evangelical work and converted many ladies, including those of the household of the king of Sri Lanka, to Buddhism. She established a nunnery and took charge of training of nuns.

By the untiring efforts of Dharmapala and Ayupali, Sri Lanka became Buddhist. A new town Aniruddhapura came up. So much was she loved by the people of the island that when she died, according to *Mahavamsa*, the king of Sri Lanka gave a fitting tribute to her by performing her last rites.

R. K. Mookerji : *Ashoka and Men and Thought in Ancient India*

V. Smith : *Ashoka*

# Gautami Balashri

(1st C.)

Gautami Balashri was mother of the famous Satavahan king Raja Raja, known after her as Gautamiputra. He routed out the foreign invaders—Sakas, Yavanas, Pallavas. Gautami Balashri is famous not for her son's achievements; she is famous in her own right, especially for her administrative capabilities.

Gautami was born of Brahmin parents. Her original name was Devi Balashri. But when she grew up she was married to Satakarni, a Kshatriya king, of the Satavahan dynasty that ruled the western coast. In 72 AD Satakarni died and Gautamiputra ascended the throne. Under the guidance of his mother, within about two decades Gautamiputra not only consolidated his position but also threw out the foreigners. He extended his empire from shore to shore.

In 95 AD Gautamiputra also passed away leaving behind his wife, young children and mother. The queen and the princes being young, the burden of the empire now fell on Balashri. She stood up to this situation boldly. She secured the empire from the enemies and carried out the administration to the satisfaction of the subjects. When the grandson came of age, she handed over the state to him. Yet the memory of the son always haunted Balashri and in 115 AD she inscribed her son's exploits in what is now known as the Nasik Prasasti. The inscription engraved after Gautamiputra's death in the nineteenth year of his son and successor Pulamayi II has been described as 'the funeral oration of a disconsolate mother'.

K. A. N. Sastri : *A History of South India*

C. R. Krishnamachari : *Bombay—Karnataka Inscription  
Epigraphica India*

D. C. Sarkar : *Select Inscriptions Vol I*

# Dhruva Devi

(4th C.)

Dhruva Devi was the wife of king Ramagupta, son of the famous king Samudragupta who had repulsed and severely punished the invading Huns. Ramagupta tried to pursue his father's policy but he was not a strong leader of men and in a battle he found himself besieged and in a difficult position. The Huns proposed to leave him in peace, provided he surrendered his queen Dhruva Devi. Ramagupta agreed to this. A theory is that he agreed to this dishonourable course on the advice of his councillors so that his people might be spared from the marauder's hands.

That was an ignominy. Chandragupta, Ramagupta's younger brother, was agitated at his brother's behaviour and offered to go to the enemy's camp in the guise of queen Dhruva Devi and to kill the hated enemy. This was agreed and as planned, Chandragupta went there and succeeded in killing the head of the Sakas. With the leader's death, the enemy army fled away. Chandragupta thus saved the honour of his family which won for him the heart of the people. This kindled a fire of love for him in the heart of Dhruva Devi but resulted into estrangement between the two brothers. Chandragupta, afraid of Ramagupta's design on his life, feigned madness. But ultimately he succeeded in killing Ramagupta. He not only seized his kingdom but also married his widow. Marriage with the husband's assassin would not have been approved by the people but for Chandragupta's bravery earlier shown in defeating the Huns.

Dhruva Devi was a talented woman and may be she influenced Chandragupta to give shelter to scholars and poets who flocked to the royal court. It has been said that as a result of Chandragupta's infatuation for her, Dhruva Devi acquired in the imperial administration a place similar to that of Nurjahan in the Mughal administration. Amongst the queens of the

been conjectured that he appointed Kalidasa as tutor to the Vakataka princes. Perhaps Kalidasa accompanied Prabhavati and the princes to Ramateka where she worshipped Ramatekaswamy. May be, Kalidasa had the inspiration of writing *Meghadut* on his visit to Ramateka which figures prominently in the poem. It is said that Kalidasa corrected the composition of *Setubandha* written by prince Pravarasena, the title taken by the younger prince.

Prabhavati witnessed yet another tragedy. Prince Divakarasena died during the thirteenth year of her regency and she had to continue her regency to the younger son for another 5-6 years. In the nineteenth year of rule of Pravarasena, she issued a charter. Five years later the king also issued a charter for his mother's welfare.

Prabhavati had inherited her father's foresight. She married her grandson Narendrasena to the Kadamba princess Ajitabhattacharika of Kuntala. The marital alliance brought to an end the enmity between the Guptas and the Kadambas.

Prabhavati was proud of her Gupta lineage and used the cognomen of her father's family even after her marriage. Contrary to the practice prevalent at that time, the copper plates of Poona and Rithapur issued by her begin with the genealogy of her father's family instead of her husband's.

Prabhavati died at the age of 75.

O. P. Singh Bhatia : *The Imperial Guptas*

S. R. Goyal : *The History of the Imperial Guptas*

भारतीय जन का इतिहास—वाकाटक-गुप्त युग

# Avvaiyar

## (5th)

Avvaiyar is one of the greatest saints and writers of ancient India. Her works namely '*Attisoodi*, *Kondraivendan*, *Muthurai* and *Nabvali* have gone into general currency in Tamil speech'. Her sayings are full of wisdom and the very name Avvai is synonymous with wisdom !

While a child, Avvaiyar lost her parents and was found and brought up by Tiruvalluvar, a great saint poet. Deeply devoted to religion and literary pursuits, she wanted to serve the people. Though sought for in marriage by many a prince and rich person, she refused to marry mortals. Lest there should be further proposals, she prayed to God to save her, and she, according to a legend, turned into an old woman of common appearance.

Avvai's talents were first discovered by Buda, a chieftain of Pulvalur. She then lived for many years in the court of Adigman, chief of Dharmapuri, who held her in high esteem and entrusted to her an embassy to Tondaimandalam. For vigour and depth of feeling, Avvaiyar's odes to the Adigman are second to none in the Puram collections. After her patron's death, she left Dharmapuri and wandered. She was honoured alike by prince and peasant throughout the Chera country. The Chera and Pandya kings paid homage to Avvai in the Rajasuya Yajna performed by the Chola king. In her benedictory odes she held up high ideals of charity, succour to the needy and protection to the poor before the then great monarchs.

Avvai preferred to live amongst the poor who flocked to her wherever she went. Loved by everyone, she was affectionately called the "Universal Grandmother". She was as well highly respected by the rulers who invited her to their courts. She advised them to lead peaceful life and at times mediated between two warring kings, pointing out to them that ambition led to war from which the common man on both sides suffered.

Gupta dynasty, Dhruva Devi is the only one whose independent seal is available. The seal discovered from Vaishali describes her as the wife of the Maharajadhiraja Sri Chandragupta and mother of Maharaja Sri Govindaraja. It has been suggested that she personally participated in the administration of Malwa. No other Gupta queen is known to have enjoyed such a privilege.

Dhruva Devi's son Kumaragupta succeeded Chandragupta to the throne.

R. C. Majumdar : *The Gupta Empire*

„ „ „ : *The Classical Age*

# Prabhavati Gupta

(365—440)

In the later part of the 4th century, the Kshatrapas were disturbing the peace on the western border of the Gupta empire. To exterminate the enemy, Chandragupta II thought it expedient to secure the southern flank of the empire so that the army could give undivided attention to the Kshatrapas in Gujarat and Malwa. In this scheme of things, the emperor found a dependable ally in the Vakataka king Prithvisena to whose son Rudrasena II he proposed his daughter Prabhavati's hand. The proposal was accepted and the marriage solemnised at Pataliputra in 380.

Prithvisena died in 385 and he was succeeded by Rudrasena II. Prabhavati wielded tremendous influence over her husband and probably she prevailed upon him to give up his ancestral religion Saivism to become a Vaishnava. Rudrasena had hardly ruled for five years when he died, leaving behind two minor sons, Divakarasena (5) and Damodarasena (2). On her now fell the responsibility of the kingdom.

Chandragupta assured Prabhavati of the assistance of army and advised her to rule the kingdom as the regent to prince Divakarasena. He sent able officers to help her in administration of the state. It was because of this support that others of the Vakataka family refrained from creating problems for her, otherwise Vindhyashakti II of the Vasim branch of the family being the eldest agnatic male member had a better claim to regency. The relations between Prabhavati and Vindhyashakti appear to have been cordial. She kept the power in her own hands and successfully administered the state for 13 years.

It was during Prabhavati's regency that Chandragupta conquered Gujarat and Kathiawar but there is no definite proof that she gave her father any military help. Chandragupta took keen interest in the education of his grandsons. It has

Avvaiyar took her themes from life in the palace as well as the hut. But more than the chivalry and magnificence of princes, the simple pleasures and daily cares of the lowly appealed to her. Her odes in the *Sangam* collections are a true mirror of contemporary Tamil life. With few words, she creates pen pictures. She adds moral precepts to poetic imagery. She is a great exponent of morality. Here are a few of her sayings:

*Ponder ere you act, speak not to provoke.*

*Harsh words do not conquer soft ones; the arrow that strikes down elephants harms not a piece of cotton; the rock that is not split with the long iron crowbar splits when the roots of a tender shrub enter it.*

*Big is the frond of the palm but scentless; sweet scented is the tiny flower. Judge not men therefore from size merely. The vast ocean has water not fit for a bath; the tiny spring beside it has good drinking water.*

*The days that are gone may be counted on little fingers; the days before us none can compute. Great is the harm in letting the days pass without doing good.*

*There is no virtue higher than philanthropy; no companion better than one's own wisdom; no conduct worthier than living with self respect.*

Avvaiyar lived to a ripe age. Her image is still there in a temple in Tiruttaraipundi in District Tanjore.

Hooper : *Hymns of the Alvars*

Jesudasan : *History of Tamil Literature*



# Karaikkal Ammaiyar

(5th C)

Saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar is one of the three greatest woman saints of South India; the other two are Mangaiyarkarasiyar, a Pandyan queen, and Isai Jnaniyar, saint Sundara's mother. The three find place in the list of 63 Nayanamaras,<sup>1</sup> the canonized Saiva saints of Tamilnadu. Her family name was Punitavati and Ammaiyar, meaning mother, is indicative of the respect she was held in.

Punitavati was a daughter and the only child of Dana-datta, a rich Vaishya of Karaikkal. She was extra-ordinarily beautiful and was devoted from her very childhood to Lord Siva. When she grew up, she was married to Paramadatta, son of a rich merchant of Nagapattinam. But as she was the only child of her family, Ammaiyar's parents persuaded Paramadatta to live at Karaikkal.

Paramadatta soon found to his great dismay that his wife was deeply devoted to Siva. So one day without informing his wife, he left the place and went to the Pandya country. He settled at Madurai and married a maiden and begot from her a child whom he named Punitavati. When Ammaiyar learnt about her husband, she went to Madurai to live with him. But the husband declared that she was a goddess. Thus snapped of all ties, Karaikkal renounced the world.

Ammaiyar would break forth in song in praise of Lord Siva. She composed 101 verses in Tamil known as *Arpuda Tiruvantadi* and another 20 verses known as *Tiru Irattai Manimalai*. She is venerated till this day and her image figures in all those temples where the statues of Nayanamaras are.

1. The saint authors of Saiva hymns are called Nayanamaras. The hymns (called *devaram*) are set to music and sung in Siva temples. The saint authors of Vaishnava hymns (called *prabandham* and *nalayiram*) are called Alvars and their hymns sung in Vishnu temples. ;

# Rajyasri

(7th C)

Rajyasri was the daughter of Prabhakaravardhan, king of Thaneswar, and sister of Rajyavardhan and Harshavardhan, the latter known for his piety and devotion to Buddhism. She was married to Grahavarman, the Maukhari king of Kanauj. Sometime after her marriage, Prabhakaravardhan died. This was followed by another misfortune. Grahavarman met a sad end at the hands of the king of Malwa. Rajyasri was taken a captive by the enemy king at Kanauj. Her brothers were distraught at the sad news and Rajyavardhan set out to punish the offenders and to secure his sister's release. Although he defeated the king of Malwa, he fell in the trap of another enemy Sashanka, king of Bengal, and was killed.

In the midst of these troubles, Rajyasri managed to escape from the prison and fled to the Vindhya forests. Harshavardhan, who succeeded his brother, soon started in quest of his sister. He located her in despair about to immolate herself and saved her. He brought her back to Kanauj, treated her with respect and carried on the administration of vast dominions in consultation with her.

Rajyasri was proficient in religious as well as administrative matters. She was pious and took keen interest in the welfare of mankind. She sat behind her royal brother and listened to the exposition of Mahayana by the Chinese pilgrim Huen-tsang. In 643 she accompanied Harsha to Prayaga where the quinquennial assembly was held. The assembly was attended by twenty kings, besides thousands of Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain theologians and priests. Harsha distributed in charity the accumulation of the treasury and when it was exhausted, a second hand garment was given him by Rajyasri to wear. Thereafter they returned to Kanauj. Rajyasri encouraged Harsha in his piety to mankind.

R.S. Tripathi : *History of Kanauj*

# Mahattara

(7-8th C)

Mahattara, popularly known as Yakshini Mahattara, was a Jain nun who has contributed more than any other nun to the popularity of the Jain scriptures.

Mahattara was a profound and brilliant scholar and even learned persons bowed before her. One of the most renowned persons of those times, Haribhadra Suri was so much impressed by her that he prided in calling himself Yakshini's son. How the two met is quite interesting.

One day, while returning home, Haribhadra passed by a Jain temple and heard a lady's voice. He tried to understand what she was uttering but could not grasp its meaning. Curious as he was, he approached the lady and asked, "Mother, what were you chattering about". Mahattara politely replied, "Sir, initially it always looks like that," which silenced Haribhadra. He then discussed with her several problems of philosophy and religion and she satisfied his questions. He was convinced of her learning and spirituality and, like a true pundit, bowed before Mahattara and requested her to let him become her disciple. She politely replied that Jain religion did not permit women to have male disciples. She advised him to go to Jinabhatt. At his request, she took him to Jinabhatt who initiated Haribhadra. Since then Haribhadra became her follower.

Another pious Jain nun of the 10th century was Guna Sadhvi who developed high spirituality and in 905 prepared the first copy of the monumental allegorical work of Siddharshi titled "*Upamitabhavaprapanchi*". Siddharshi called her the goddess of learning.

In 1118, another Mahattara (known as Mahanandasri) and another Jain nun named Yakini Viramati actively helped Maladhari Hemachandra in composing a commentary of Jinabhadra's *Visheshabhashyaka-bhashya*.

*Jain Sahitya Ka Brihad Itihas (Part III)*

## Surya Devi

(8th C)

In the eighth century, the sword of Islam moved fast from its base at Baghdad under the Khalifa. One of his representative military commanders, Hajjaj annexed territory after territory in the east. After many repulses in Sindh, Hajjaj's relation, Mir Kasim succeeded in defeating Raja Dahir of Sind. He captured a large booty, including the Raja's wife and two daughters, named Surya Devi and Párimal Devi and sent them to Hajjaj who despatched them to the Khalifa. The girls were consigned to the Khalifa's harem to be presented to him on a suitable date.

One night the Khalifa ordered the two girls to be brought in his presence. When he saw them, he was struck by their beauty and ordered the attendant to leave the elder one. But before they were separated, one of them addressed the Khalifa, "I am not fit for the bed chamber of the Khalifa, because Muhammed-bin-Kasim dishonoured us both before sending to the Khalifa". This kindled anger in the Khalifa and he ordered that Muhammad-bin-Kasim be wrapped up in the raw hide of an ox and sent to the capital.

When the mandate reached Kasim at Udhapur, he directed the officer to carry out the order. Kasim was wrapped in raw hide, put into a box and carried to the capital. The Khalifa directed the box to be opened in the female apartment. He called for Dahir's daughters and said, 'Come and see how supreme are my commands'. The girls came forward to look at Kasim, recognised the dead body, and raising their hands praised the Khalifa. They then said, 'Kings of great justice should not proceed hastily in perilous matters, nor act precipitously upon the information of friends or enemies'. On the Khalifa's enquiry as to what the meaning of those words was, they replied, "We raised the charge against Muhammad-bin-Kasim because he slew our father, plundered his kingdom

and wealth, and sent us as prisoners to a foreign land. 'The king in his anger did not weigh our words but issued the fatal order. The truth is this man's hands never touched the skirts of our purity. Our object was to revenge our father and so we made this accusation. Our wishes have been fulfilled, but there has been a serious failure in the king's justice'.

The Khalifa was overwhelmed with grief. According to Mir-Masum, the historian, 'the fire of anger burst from the furnace of the Khalifa's harem' and he ordered the two girls to be tied to the tails of horses, taken round the city and thrown into the Tigris. But according to the author of *Chacha-nama* whereas Kasim was seized, fettered, imprisoned and tortured to death with Khalifa's sanction, the two girls were bricked between the walls.

Whatever the version, the fact remains that the girls were brave and were fired with patriotic zeal—of course their patriotism should be judged in the light of the then prevailing thoughts.

*Chach-nama*

# Andal

(8-9th C)

*Jessamine lady !  
With your sweet smiles  
Torture me not !*

—Andal

Andal is one of the most fascinating of the Indian women. A great Vaishnava sage, her ardour as a devotee is extremely intense and her poetic quality comparable to the best of the poets. Although the range of her experience is limited, she possesses an elusive charm and a penetrating sweetness in tone.

She imparts a highly sensuous colouring to the religious theme. Her passion for her divine lover is that of a voluptuous woman for a man, hardly the delicate, ethereal longing of a maiden for the man she is to wed. Yet sometimes she handles a love theme with effeminate delicacy e.g., she asks the flute (that Krishna plays upon) about the fragrance of Krishna's lips.

*Smell they of myrrh ?  
Or do they smell of lotus flowers ?  
His beautiful, lady, lips of coral,  
Are they sweet ?*

Andal's is a wonderful love story full of supernaturalism and the miraculous. She was found as a baby by Periyalvar, the foremost Vaishnavite poet, in his garden. He brought her up as his daughter and her mind was nourished by the love story of Krishna. Andal later refused to marry a mortal and boldly wore the garlands intended for Krishna's image. The story ends in Andal's union with her divine lover.

Andal has left only two works : *Tiru-p-paval* (30 stanzas) and *Nacciyaar* (143 stanzas), in both of which Krishna is the hero and she the heroine; the setting is either the Kavarattam where Krishna romped among the cowherdesses on Yamuna or Madurapuri. *Tiru p-paval* owes its origin to a religious obser-

vance among maidens of the cowherd's class. Girls having fasted all night go every morning to bathe in the river and practise certain rites, which are to earn for them good husbands and for their country abundant rain. Andal assumes that she and her friends go from door to door, preaching and rousing the still sleepy girls. They land in the house of Nanda, Krishna's father. The door is opened for them by Nappinai, Krishna's wife. Andal wants Krishna to help her friends in the rites, for he is not only the husband they require and the god they are ministering to do their rites but he is also their companion and playmate as well.

Andal's description of nature is vivid. This is how she portrays morning :

*Do you not hear the chirping of the noisy birds.  
And the churning of the curd by cowherds' wives.  
To the jingle of the bracelets.*

In the *Nacciya Tirumozhi* Andal narrates to her maidens the wonderful dream she had of her marriage with Krishna. The elaborate rituals of a Brahmin wedding are narrated and her description is so popular that it is generally sung at the Vaishnavite marriages.

In a piece, *Pillai-t-tamil*, she imagines herself as a little girl whose doll house has been destroyed by the mischievous Krishna. Her works show extreme sensitiveness to beauty and flaming whole-souled devotion wrapped in sweet music.

**Rajput**



# Bharati

(8-9th C)

Indeed there cannot be much doubt that Sankara's revival of Vedantic Hinduism in India is largely indebted to the famous and venerable lady Bharati.

'Self testimony is universal testimony', was the chant of parrots that welcomed Sankaracharya, the Advaita philosopher, when he entered into the palatial house of Mandana Misra, a great philosopher and the chief Pandit in the court of the king of Mahishmati. Sankara was on one of his rounds and he found Mandana Misra and his wife Bharati attended by a host of male and female servants. But Mandana that day was performing *shraddha* and was none too happy to welcome a stranger. Why, he was wroth and if he was not rude to the visitor it was only because of the presence of the Brahmins who had come to the *shraddha*.

Sankara proposed to Mandana for the honour of a discourse with him. The latter agreed and they sought for an umpire. This honour was given to Bharati, the gifted and accomplished wife of Mandana Misra. The contest between the two scholars began with the stipulation that whosoever was defeated would take on himself the way of life of the victor. In other words, if Sankara was defeated, he would marry and become a house-holder, the worst sin a *sanyasin* could commit. On the other hand, if Mandana was to lose, he would become *sanyasin* and receive the red-robe from the hands of his own wife. This was a very crucial moment in Bharati's life.

As umpire, Bharati threw two garlands, one each, over the shoulders of the contestants and declared that that person whose garland began fading first would own defeat. The debate between Mandana and Sankara continued uninterruptedly day after day, meanwhile Bharati continued attending to her household duties.

After several days Mandana's garland started fading first

and he gracefully owned the defeat and offered to become a *sanyasin* and to follow Sankara. For Bharati the moment was so crucial; a *sanyasin* could not be a husband, he was as good as dead. She, therefore, prepared to leave the house. 'What a house is worth if a married woman is to live in it without her husband, who though alive is presumed to have nothing to do with the family'.

Sankara was a scholar with magnamity and begged of her the honour of discussion and pleaded that she should leave the place only when he agreed to it. She granted his request.

Then began the disputation between Sankara and Bharati. For 17 days she passed from one *sutra* to another but to no avail. Now to discomfit the opponent, she resolved to question him about *Kama-sutra*, the science of love, in which Sankara, a bachelor, had no experience. Feeling his reputation at stake, he requested of her to put off the discussion for one month during which he would prepare to meet her on the subject of her choice. This was allowed.

What is now added to the life of Sankara by his biographers is like a fairy-tale. It is said that by his Yogic power Sankara left his body and the soul entered into the body of king Amruka who had just died and was being cremated. The family finding Amruka alive was very happy. Sankara, in his new form, in the company of the queens became an expert in 'love'. At the stipulated time he parted company from Amruka's body and entered into his own body. Then he came back to resume discussion with Bharati.

In the controversy that ensued, Sankara squarely met the opponent's questions on love; Bharati was satisfied. Sankara had established his omniscience. But so impressed was Sankara by her scholarship and wisdom that he later built a temple at Sringeri and dedicated it to her.

Mandana became a *sanyasin* with the name of Suresh-varacharya and followed Sankara. Bharati too renounced the world and accompanied Mandana wherever he went. She was also known as Ubhaya-Bharati.

C.N. Krishnasami Aiyer : *Sankaracharya*  
 S.S. Suryanarayana Sastri : *Sankaracharya*  
 W.A. Fairservis : *The Roots of Ancient India*

# Avantisundari

(9-10th C.)

Avantisundari was an accomplished Chahaman princess. Marriage with Rajashekhara, court-poet of Gurajara Pratihara king Mahendravarman and Mahipal of Kanauj and later of Kalchuri king Yuvaraja I, further embellished her talents. She wrote in Sanskrit and Prakrit and her views on aesthetics were treated with respect. She was a rhetorician and inspired her husband; he cited her views on poetics in his famous work *Kavya-mimansa*.

Rajashekhara is of the view that a poet should possess knowledge of diverse subjects and that exercise helps a poet in perfecting his expression. Avantisundari differs. She says this is not perfection, it is mere lack of skill; how else could expressions of different writers on one theme (or subject) be perfect. According to her, a composition that gives pleasure to connoisseurs should be considered perfect. (chapter V *Kavya-mimansa*)

Elsewhere Rajashekhara quotes Avantisundari. She says that a thing possesses several traits and that selection of one or more of these traits depends on the style and expression of a poet. (Ch VII)

On plagiarism, Avantisundari has definite views. She saw nothing wrong in borrowing rich ideas to enrich one's own expressions, provided the expression is of a lesser known poet and his ideas are not widely known.

Avantisundari was a poet in her own right and Hemachandra cites three of her stanzas in his *Desi-namamala* to illustrate the meanings of certain Prakrit expressions. Unfortunately none of her work has been discovered so far. Nor is any other information available about her.

Rajashekhara wrote four dramas and staged at her request his Saurashtri prakrit drama *Karpur-manjari*. In the prologue of Act I of the drama, the stage-manager asks his

assistant, "At whose instance are you enacting the play?" The assistant replies, "The crest garland of the Chahaman family, the wife of chief poet Rajashekhara, the lady whose husband wrote the play, Avantisundari—she desires us to enact it". (His other dramas were in Sanskrit and in these Prakrit was used by some characters, as prescribed.) Perhaps Rajashekhara wanted to experiment in dramaturgy and Avantisundari helped him in this project; in people's language the drama became popular. The distinguishing features of his dramas are lightness and grace of diction.

It has been suggested that Avantisundari was the same as Sundara for whose benefit her brother Dhanapal composed the Prakrit dictionary *Paiyalachchhi*. The identification is, however, not supported. Similarly, it does not appear correct, as some Europeans have tried to assert, that her husband was related to the king of Chedi.

Rajashekhara mentions another famous woman, Shil Bhattarika whose writings in Panchali style have been placed besides the writings of the famous prose writer Bana.

G.H. Ojha : *Madhyakaleen Bharatiya Sanskriti* (Hindi)

Rajashekhara : *Kavya Mimansa*

Hemachandra : *Desi-namamala*

Konow & Lanman : *Rajashekhara's Karpur-manjari*

# Didida

(950-1003)

In vice and dissoluteness, Queen Didida of Kashmir has probably no equal in Indian history.

Didida was daughter of Simharaja, the chief of Lohara in Kashmir, and wife of king Kshemagupta who was highly immoral and in whose time profanity reached its zenith. Didida matched her consort but feigned all the virtues. When Kshemagupta died she informed her people that she would become a sati on the pyre of her husband and with great difficulty, she could be dissuaded by her ministers from immolating herself. To the throne was now raised her son Abhimanyu, under her guardianship. All avenues of sensuous enjoyment were open to her and she indulged in these without any inhibition. She had affairs with Minister Phalgun, who had conquered Rajauri, and with a young herdsman named Tunga Khasi. She appointed one of the procurers to a high post by eliminating some officers. Many highly placed officers served as her panders and pimps and they could visit her bed-chamber without any qualms of conscience.

Yet Didida was a capable woman. By her ability and skill, she succeeded in crossing 'the ocean-like hosts of her foes'. She destroyed her corrupt ministers and became virtually the undisputed ruler. Abhimanyu and later Nandigupta were rulers only in name. In 981 she imprisoned and disposed off her grandsons Nandigupta, Tribhuvana and Bhimagupta who had detested her ways, and ascended the throne. She appointed Tunga Khasi as her Prime Minister over other heads which led to revolt by some claimants. She crushed the revolt by bribing the revolting Brahmins and hiding Tunga in a closed apartment.

For a while she led a pious life, built temples and gave charities. However, she reverted to her earlier ways and it is said that she slayed one grandson by employing witchcraft.

In 1003 she raised Sangramaraja, her brother's son, to the throne. Shortly after this she died.

Didda, it is strange, that is today remembered by the people for her extremely immoral conduct.

P.N.K. Bamzai : *A History of Kashmir*

Kalhan : *Rajatarangini*

# Minaladevi

## (11th C)

"If you want to see justice, go to Dholka and have a look at the lake Malav." The quip is about Queen Minaladevi, wife of Karna, a Chalukya king of Anahillapatanawada in Gujarat of the 11th Century.

Minaladevi built Minalasar and Malav lakes. Giving a regular shape to the Malav lake required the levelling up of a house that came in its periphery. The queen offered to buy the house for a big sum from its woman owner. The latter would not agree and said, "I shall be famous with your lake", perhaps meaning thereby that she would sacrifice her life but not vacate the house. A queen taking this as an affront would have like an autocratic ruler of the times ordered for demolition. Not so with Minaladevi, whatever the advice of her nobles. She did not coerce the woman. Minaladevi was an able and just administrator. She took keen interest in the well-being of her people and built several monuments. An act of charity of hers was the remission of tax from pilgrims.

Minaladevi was daughter of Jaya'eshin, a Kadamba king of Karnataka. She was married to Karna I and they begot a son whom they named Siddharaja Jayasimha. When Karna died, Siddharaja was young and the responsibility of managing the state affairs devolved on Minaladevi which she performed admirably. She inspired her son who carried out several war-like exploits and became famous for his deeds, many after her death. He was sorry that his mother could not be a witness to his acts of valour and said, "I wish no mother would give birth to a son who achieves a good fortune after her death."

Later in 12th century another queen Naikidevi (of the same Chalukya dynasty) faced a similar situation. In 1178 when Mohammed Ghuri's army attacked Gujarat, taking prince Mularaja in her lap, she led the army and at Gadaraghatta gave the enemy a crushing defeat.

A.K. Mazumdar : *Chalukyas of Gujarat*

# Kolavati

(11th C)

Kolavati, a queen of Orissa, is responsible for the construction of the famous temple of Brahmeshwar.

Kolavati was born in a solar dynasty but was married to king Chandrahara of the lunar Kara dynasty. He was a powerful king of Orrisa and freed Koshala and Utkala, earlier seized by the Cholas. He died in about 1054 leaving behind his queen and son Udyotakesari who succeeded as Mahasivagupta IV. In about 1072 Kolavati built the temple of the deity Brahmeshwar at Ekamra (present Bhuvaneshwar).

Brahmeshwar is one of the typical Orissa temples which are known for their "being one of the most compact and homogeneous architectural groups in India" (Fergusson). It is situated within an enclosure and with its four subsidiary shrines at the four corners it makes a regular Panchayatana group. It has a refined appearance and the nearest approach to great Lingaraja temple.

The Orissa temples are built in the Nagara style which is distinct from the Dravida and Vesara styles. The distinctive features of the Nagara temples are their cruciform plan and tower (*shikhara*). The Dravida *prasada* is octagonal (or hexagonal) from the neck to the top and its outstanding characteristic is the pyramidal elevation of the tower (*vimana*), consisting of a multiplication of storey after storey, each a replica of the sanctum cell and slightly reduced in extent than below, ending in a domical member as the corning element.

The *vimana* of the Brahmeshwar temple is 60 ft. high. The *Jagamohan* has a window on each side covered by five pillars. 'Its exterior is covered with human figures which are certainly later than those of the Lingaraja on the Ananta Vasudeva. The temple possesses four smaller temples at four corners and is surrounded by a stone compound.'

R.D. Banerji : *History of Orissa*



# Shantala Devi

(12th C)

The name Shantala brings to mind an image of a woman of exquisite beauty, grace, charm and wisdom—an epitome of what a woman should be. She was versatile and her qualities have been described eloquently by poets and others. One chronicler says that she was 'a Brihaspati in discrimination, a Vachaspati in ready wit..., expert in singing, instrumental music and dancing...'. She was also said to be an exceptional beauty.

Shantala Devi was the chief queen (*pattarani*) of the famous Hoyasala King Vishnuvardhana of Dwarasamudra. What makes her eminent was her devotion to dance and music which figures in stones in some of the Hoyasala temples.

Shantala was the eldest daughter of Marasingayya, a prosperous Saiva jeweller, and Machikabbe, a devout Jain. Brought up in a liberal and enlightened atmosphere, Shantala developed a charming personality which attracted king Bittideva Hoyasala and the two were married. In 1117 she assumed the crown as *pattamahadevi*. The palace had a congenial atmosphere for fine arts and literature. The three queens of Bittideva's elder brother and predecessor, Ballal I, were well-versed in science, dance and music and Shantala continued with her interests and excelled in dance and music.

Bittideva was a follower of Jain religion but under the influence of Ramanuja he was converted to Vaishnavism and renamed Vishnuvardhana. The king and queen were tolerant and other religions too flourished in their time. They extended generous grants to all religions. Shantala built in 1123 the Savati-Gandhavarani Basti of Shantajiva at Sravan-Belgola and presented certain endowments to her guru Prabhachandra for meeting the daily cost of worship and feeding of the ascetics. At Belur, she set up an image in the Kappe-Chennagiraya temple and the statues of Vishnuvardhana and Shantala are

testimony of their broad outlook in religious matters. This earned for her the titles of 'crest jewel of perfect faith' and 'a rampart of the Jain faith'.

Shantala brought good luck to her husband. He rescued his country from the Chalukyas and the Cholas, established an independent Hoyalala kingdom and enlarged its boundaries. To the king, it is recorded, Shantala was the 'Goddess of Victory in Battle' and 'Goddess of Wealth and Fame in Peace'. To mark his victories in battles, Vishnuvardhana constructed the famous Chenna-Keshava temples at Belur and Halebid in which, it is said, Shantala herself modelled as Madanika for the great architect Jakanakacharya as well for the artisans.

Vishnuvardhana had no son and therefore adopted one. But unfortunately when he was on a campaign in 1131, the prince suddenly died. The sensitive Shantala was so shocked that, it is said, she committed suicide by jumping from a cliff at Sivaganga. On hearing of the tragedy, Vishnuvardhana hurried to the spot but then Shantala was no more alive. While her parents died of the shock, Vishnuvardhana was upset for quite sometime. Although later he married and had a few queens namely Lakshmi Devi, Bommala Devi, Shantala Devi II, Devika Devi and Rajala Devi but none could fill in the vacuum.

The figures in stone in the famous temple of Halebid leave a permanent impression on the visitor. Perhaps in this sense Shantala has no parallel in the world history.

K.V. Iyer : *Shantala Devi (Kannada)*

Dr. D.V. Gundappa : *Antah Purana Geethagalu*

C. Hayavadana Rao : *Mysore Gazetteer (ed.)*

Inscriptions at Belur, Halebid, Hassan, Sravanabelgola and Sivaganga

# Akka Mahadevi

(1130-1166)

Akka Mahadevi, a great mystic poetess of Karnataka, is held in high esteem by the people. The word 'Akka', meaning elder sister, reflects the people's sentiments about her.

Mahadevi was born in the 12th century in an intensely devoted Saiva family at Udatadi, a town then ruled by a Jain prince named Kaushika. Once the prince happened to see the lass and was so smitten with love that he proposed her for marriage. Under the threat of harm overtaking her parents, Mahadevi agreed to marry him provided after marriage he did not interfere in her faith. He promised that she would be free from the marital bondage, should there ever be a breach of the condition. The two were married.

But soon afterwards the euphoria was over. The prince felt that she devoted more time to the worship of the Maheshwara and tried to dissuade her from her practice. The prince came between her and the Maheshwara, between her and the *linga*, and between her and the *guru*. This hurt her and Mahadevi left the palace with the *linga* in her hand and renounced the world. She now concentrated on her deity and nothing could distract her; all her parents' persuasion and husband's pleadings failed and with a resolute will and uncommon courage she pursued her faith.

Mahadevi moved from place to place singing devotional songs. She came to Kalyan where she met Basaveshwara and enquired of him what she should do to find the deity Chenna Mallikarjuna, an elusive lover. Basaveshwara was deeply moved by the young saint's spiritual perfection and blessed her. Taking leave of him she went to Srisailla, the abode of the deity, Mallikarjuna, and it is said, in 1166 there (at Srisailla) she realised God in His supreme form and experienced mystic union with the Formless.

Akka Mahadevi is credited with the authorship of many

*vachanas* that express anguished longing of her mystic love. 'Her *vachanas* are lyrical and express her intimate personal feelings'. She has been compared with Andal and Mira Bai who, like her, had chosen the God as husband during their early lives.

Veerasaivism developed in Karnataka during the 12th century under the guidance of Basaveshwara, Allamaprabhu and others. That Mahadevi is placed beside Basaveshwara and Allamaprabhu speaks volumes about this noble lady. Veerasaivism gave women equal rights and believed in upliftment of down trodden low castes, vegetarianism and dignity of labour.

Two Vachanas of Mahadevi :

*Do not think I am a helpless woman and threaten. I fear nothing at your hands. I shall live on dried leaves and lie on swords, Chenna Mallikarjuna ! If you will, I shall give up both body and life to you, and become pure.*

*Oh ! parrots singing so joyously ! Do you know, do you know ? Swans playing on the margin of the lake ! Do you know, do you know ? Oh cuckoos who lift up your voices and sing ! Do you know, do you know ? Oh, peacocks playing in hill and valley ! Oh, are you aware where my lover Chenna Mallikarjuna is ? I pray you, tell me, tell me.*

# Lilavati

(12th C)

"One pair out of a flock of geese remained sporting in the water and saw seven times half the square root of the flock proceeding to the shore, tired of diversion. Tell me, dear girl, the number of the flock?"

"If thou knowest two numbers such that the sum of their cubes is a square and the sum of their squares a cube, I acknowledge thee to be an eminent mathematician".

The 'dear girl' referred to was Lilavati and the person who posed the problem her father Bhaskaracharya. The time and place : 12th century India. The literary and cultural activities were then on the decline but Bhaskara made several outstanding discoveries in algebra which could be surpassed by the European countries only by about the 18th century.

Bhaskara composed his great treatise *Siddhanta Shiromani* in 1150. This is divided into four parts, viz., *Patiganita* i.e. arithmetic (also known as *Lilavati* after the daughter), *Bijaganita* i.e. algebra, *Grahaganita* (based on *Surya Siddhanta*), and *Goladhyaya*. The last two parts deal with astronomy, especially motions of planets and calculations of the sphere.

About Lilavati a story is prevalent that Bhaskara's daughter's name was Lilavati after whom he named the work. A good astrologer that he was, Bhaskara came to know from her horoscope that her married life would be cut short. This disaster could be averted, Bhaskara computed, if her marriage was solemnized on a definite date punctually at a specified time. He made all arrangements for this. For measuring time he constructed a sand glass in which sand would flow from one vessel to another beneath it through a small orifice at fixed intervals of time. (This was a popular device of measuring time in those days.) On the day previous to the marriage, Lilavati inquisitively looked into this new instrument which had been installed in her house, and as fate would have

it, a small pearl from the ornament on her nose fell into the sand and got mixed with it. This retarded the movement of the sand with the result that the marriage was celebrated later than the time which had been fixed after careful astrological calculations. Lilavati lost her husband soon after the marriage. To console her in her life long grief, Bhaskara taught her arithmetic and named his work after her.

The *Lilavati* contains 278 verses and deals with various subjects e.g., units of weights and measures, twenty arithmetical operations, viz., addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, square root, cube, cube root, five rules of reduction of fraction, rule of 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 terms and barter, 8 arithmetical determinations, mixture, progression, plane figure, excavation, stacks, saw, mounds of grain and shadow of a gunman, indeterminate equations of second degree, triangles, quadrilaterals, areas of circles, volumes of spheres, cones, pyramids etc. A number of commentaries on the translations of *Lilavati* have appeared within the last eight centuries.

Bhaskara was born in the Sahyadri Hills. Teaching and learning mathematics was an ancestral vocation with him. He learnt mathematics from his father, a mathematician, and he himself parted knowledge to his son Lokasamudra and daughter Lilavati.

H.N. Verma & Amrit Verma : *100 Great Indians Through The Ages*

# Samyogita

(12th C)

Samyogita's name is associated with that of Prithviraj Chauhan and their romance is said to have precipitated Mohammed Ghuri's invasion on India.

Samyogita (also known as Kantimati) was a Gahadavala princess, daughter of king Jayachandra of Kanauj. Jayachandra and Prithviraj were rivals for power and therefore bitter enemies. According to Chand Bardai's *Prithviraja Raso*, while young Samyogita heard of the Chahaman king's valour and physical prowess and since that very time she started entertaining a desire to become his consort. But since her father was an enemy of the Chahaman king, she kept her desire secret to herself. She, however, secretly carried on correspondence with him.

The princess grew to be a beautiful damsel and her father Jayachandra decided to marry her. As the custom among the Rajputs was, he organized a swayamvara, that is an assembly at which the bride would select a match for herself from amongst the audience. Jayachandra sent out invitations to princes but excluded Prithviraj and placed his statue at the entrance of the hall as a door-keeper.

When the august audience assembled Samyogita was taken to the hall. But she did not select any prince and moved to the door where to everyone's surprise, she garlanded Prithviraj's statue. At this time the Chauhan king, who was hiding nearby with his attendants, rushed to the spot and rode off with the princess. Jayachandra's army pursued Prithviraj but in vain. The Chahaman king's *samants* fought a rear-guard action to cover his escape and he safely reached his capital where he married the princess with great pomp. The marriage took place sometime between the first (1190-91) and second (1192) battles of Terain with Mohammed Ghuri.

Prithviraj had a number of wives amongst whom

Ichchhanidevi, a Parmar princess, Shashivrata, a Yadava princess, and Samyogita were prominent.

In the first battle of Terain, Prithviraj gave Ghuri a crushing defeat but allowed him to escape. In the second battle Ghuri acted shrewdly and deceived his enemy and in the end Prithviraj lost the battle. It is said that after the first battle Prithviraj was more devoted to his new queen and was perhaps with her on the battle field on the night of the fateful day. There are two versions : according to one Prithviraj died on the battle field and according to the other he was taken prisoner and later executed.

Historians doubt the authenticity of the romantic story. Whatever that be, with the defeat of Chahamanas the morale of other kings broke down and the entire country was seized with panic.

*Dashrath Sharma : Early Chaulian Dynasty*

*G.H. Ojha : Early History of Rajputana*



# Anupama

(12-13th C)

*Lakshmi is fickle  
The spouse of Siva,  
Chandi is terrible  
Sachi has a co-wife  
Ganga goes downwards  
Sarasvati possesses  
Merely the virtue of speech  
But Anupama is anupama (incomparable).*

Thus was praised Anupama by a contemporary poet. And, undoubtedly the Lunavasikha Temple of Dilwara after the name of her son and 'unrivalled for minute delicacy of carving, beauty of detail and its crisp translucent still-like treatment of the designs' is a veritable dream of beauty. It is *chef-d'oeuvre* of Jain architecture.

Anupama was wife of Tejapal of the Porwal Jain community. He and his elder brother Vastupal were ministers of Vividhwala, the king of Dholka, in Gujarat. Once they planned to go on a pilgrimage and with a view to safety, they went to bury their wealth at Abu. While digging a spot, they lay their hands on more wealth and were unable to decide what to do with it. Vastupal sought for the views of Anupama. She replied, "It may be kept on the peaks of the mountains so that it may not fall into other hands, as it has fallen into ours".

The two brothers spent the wealth on building temples on Girnar and Abu and credit for the construction of some of the temples should rightly go to Anupama. She constantly supervised the construction and it was at her instance that amenities of food, rest etc. were provided to the artisans. Inscriptions in the temple mention that it was built for the spiritual welfare of Anupama and her son Lunavasikha.

The construction of the main temple, measuring 155 feet by 92 feet, was finished by 1230 though Tejapal continued to

build some of the subsidiary structures, one of which is dedicated to his second wife Saradadevi.

"The striking feature of the Tejapal temple is the pendant of the dome which according to Fergusson 'hangs from the centre more like a lustre of crystal drops than a solid mass of marble'. The principal cell contains a colossal image of Neminath with his conchshell symbol on the seat. The florid reliefs and carvings on the porticos of the 39 cells represent episodes from the life of the presiding deity."

The exterior of the temple is plain which heightens the overpowering effect of the interior decorations which have a hypnotic effect and prevent a visitor from noting the structural deficiencies e.g. the laws of proportions have been to some extent disregarded; the heights of the domes are too stunted compared to their diameters, and the ceiling of the bays of the transepts too low. The unnecessarily heavy architraves are the antithesis of the fair lightness of the sculpture and gossamer tracery.

Anupama gave patronage to scholars without discrimination for which reason she was called *sad-darshan-mata*, the mother of six systems of philosophy. She wrote *Kankana-kanya*. Later her husband and brother-in-law built a lake called Anupamasar in her honour.

A.K. Majumdar : *Chalukyas of Gujarat*  
Publications Division : *Temples of North India*

**Islamic**

# Raziya Sultana

(13th C)

Raziya, the only woman to have ever sat on Delhi's throne, is a fascinating character. Progressive in outlook and dynamic in action, she was opposed to the conservative and orthodox spirit of her times. Even though her Amirs and Maliks could not adjust themselves to a woman's rule, they admired her courage and wisdom and qualities of politician and warrior. According to one of her biographers, "She was a great sovereign, sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects, of warlike talent and endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings".

Raziya was the daughter of Iltutmish, the Sultan of Delhi. In her young age she had assisted her father in the affairs of the government and the Sultan was well aware of her qualities. And when he was on his death bed, he nominated her as successor in preference to his surviving sons who, he thought, were not capable of administration. But the Turkish nobles of the court thought otherwise. They were too proud and it hurt their feelings to bow before a woman. In April 1236 they raised the eldest surviving prince, Ruknuddin, to the throne. But they soon found that he was a profligate and unfit for administration. The poor Ruknuddin was hanged and in late 1236 Raziya sat on the throne.

Raziya was a talented woman. By her astuteness and diplomacy, she overpowered her enemies. She cast aside the veil and donned the tunic and the address of a man and ably conducted the affairs of the government in open darbar. Once she found her position against the king of Narwar untenable. She acted boldly and ordered the evacuation of the Gwalior Fort so that her army might not suffer unnecessarily. She appointed persons who she thought were with her to high posts. Such notable appointments included those of Balban,

**Yakut and Altunia.**

Raziya encouraged education. She appointed the historian Minhajus Seraj as in-charge of Nasiri College and established many schools. Her Amirs, however, considered many of her changes as un-Islamic. Her undue favour to Jamaluddin Yakut, an Abyssinian, in raising him to the high office of Amir-ul-Umra offended the Mamluks, the 40-Amirs. Although for sometime she succeeded in establishing her authority and restored peace and prosperity, Raziya could not enjoy a peaceful reign.

The Amirs were jealous of Yakut. They resented Yakut lifting Raziya in his arms to horse back and finally they revolted against her. Initially their efforts proved abortive. An attempt by a Turkish named Nuruddin on her life in 1237 in Juma Masjid proved a ludicrous fiasco. But when she went to suppress the revolting Altunia, the governor of Sirhind, the latter's forces succeeded in slaying Yakut and taking Raziya prisoner. Even then she did not lose courage and used her feminine charm. She married Altunia and with his army marched towards Delhi. Unfortunately her stars were dim. She was deserted by her followers and defeated by the forces led by Jalaluddin Balban. The next day Raziya and Altunia were put to death.

Raziya lies buried in Bulbulikhana in Delhi.

Rafiq Zakaria : *Raziya Sultana*

# Mukta Bai

(1279-1297)

Muktabai is one of the pioneers of the Varakari cult prevalent in Maharashtra.

Muktabai was the fourth and youngest child of Vitthalapant and Rukmabai of Apegaon, in Maharashtra. She had three elder brothers Nrivitti, Jnanadeva and Sopan, who are well known saints. But their story is full of pathos.

Vitthalapant after marriage to Rukmabai moved to her village Alindi. For years the couple did not beget any child. Vitthalapant developed an indifference to worldly life and one day he left home for Varanasi. He was accepted and initiated as an anchorite by Ramanand. Rukmabai continued to live at Alindi.

After about twelve years, Ramananda on return from a pilgrimage halted at Alindi. Rukmabai called on the saint to pay her respects. He was sorry to learn her tale and regretted that Vitthalapant had not informed him about his married life. He blessed her of a family life and on reaching Varanasi persuaded Vitthalapant to return to Alindi and resume householder's life.

Rukmabai begot four children—three sons—Nrivitti, Jnanadeva and Sopan, and one daughter, Muktabai. But at Alindi the family was treated as outcast. Tormented by social boycott, Vitthalapant threw himself into the Ganges at Allahabad. Rukmabai too followed her husband and the children were left behind to fend for themselves. The boys grew to be great scholars and once Jnanadeva, it is said, performed some miracle which changed the attitude of their tormentors. His exposition of the *Bhagvad-Gita* also brought public applause.

Muktabai was all along with her brothers during the years of trial and as time changed, she also received her share of admiration and honour and was supposed to possess supernatural powers. A saint now, she initiated others into spirituality.

There is a legend current about Muktabai's refusal to honour Namadeva saying that mere staying with God does not make a man worthy of salute. According to another she was the spiritual guide of Changadev, a great yogi of the times.

Muktabai wrote many *abhangas*. Hers was a brief life like that of a rose. She was struck by lightning and died when she was barely 18.

A quote from Muktabai :

"An ascetic is pure in mind and forgives the offences of the people. If the world is hot as fire owing to evaporation, a sage should with pleasure be cool as water. If people hurt them with weapons of words, saints should treat those remarks as pieces of advice. This universe is a single piece of cloth woven with the one thread of Brahman, so please open the door, O ! Jnaneshwar".

R.D. Ranade : *Mysticism in Maharashtra*

Bahirat : *The Philosophy of Jnanadeva*

# Rudramba

(13-14th C)

'A lady of much distinction, a lover of justice, equity and peace'  
—Marco Polo about Rudramba

Ganapati Kakatiya, the 13th century king of Telangana, had only two daughters, Rudramba and Ganapamba, and no son. But he made no distinction between son and daughter and gave Rudramba and Ganapamba good education and when they came of age, found suitable matches for them. Rudramba was married to the Chalukya prince Virabhadreshvara. After sometime the king Ganapati designated Rudramba as his successor and in 1258 he associated Rudramba with his Government.

In 1261 on Ganapati's death, Rudramba assumed the royal power and ruled the kingdom for three long decades, though this was full of turmoil. The trouble started when she gave shelter to Samarapani, a Yadava prince of Devagiri, against the latter's nephews Krishna and Mahadeva. The Yadavas were the sworn enemies of the Kakatiyas and Mahadeva found an excuse to invade the Telangana country. He defeated Rudramba and captured some elephants and musical instruments. Fortunately, he spared her life.

The victory of the Yadavas greatly impaired Rudramba's political power and her feudatories tried to take advantage of the situation. One Ambadeva Maharaja established friendly relations with her enemies, the Yadavas and the Pandyas, and declared independence. Not only that he also defied her power by placing one Manuma Gandagopala, who was formerly dethroned by Ganapati, on the throne of Nellurapura. She could never take back these territories during her life time. And then, in 1260 the Pallavas too won a victory against the Kakatiyas.

Despite these setbacks, Rudramba ruled over her subjects judiciously. She was interested in the welfare of her subjects



and once allotted two villages for the maintenance of a temple (attached with a college) and of the teachers in the institution. She also allotted land to a physician so that he could attend to the medical needs of teachers, students and others. The Venetian traveller Marco Polo who visited Matturupalli in 1293 speaks very high of her administrative qualities.

Rudramba was blessed with a daughter named Mumma-damba who was given in marriage to Mahadeva. In order to ward off difficulties that might come up in succession, Rudramba adopted her grandson Prataparudra as successor and from 1290 associated him with the government. Two years later she abdicated in his favour. Prataparudra was a mighty king and he defeated several enemies. However, in 1309 when Malik Kafur laid a siege of Warangal, he had to buy peace by giving the invader his treasure, including the famous Kohinoor. May be an added insult to injury, Rudradeva received in the fort a robe of honour sent by the Malik.

In spite of these setbacks Rudramba it cannot be denied, was a great ruler.

Narasimha Sastry : *Rudramma*

# Devala Devi

(13-14th C)

Wars have been waged for the sake of land, wealth and women. Devala Devi was an exquisitely beautiful woman for whose possession the Khiljis not only waged a war but also perpetuated untold miseries on the people.

Devala Devi was the daughter of Rai Karan Baghela, king of Gujarat, from his beautiful wife, Kamaladevi. After the fall of Gujarat Kamaladevi was taken possession of by Alauddin Khilji and forced into the imperial harem. Rai Karan with his daughter Devala Devi, then six months old, took refuge with Ramachandra Yadava, king of Devagiri. The Yadava king treated the Baghela Rai with considerateness and gave him a small area, Baglana, which he ruled. Devala was a pretty girl and Singhana Deo, son of Ram Chandra Yadav, cherished a desire of marrying her. Since the Rajputs considered themselves superior to the Yadavas, the Rai was reluctant to marry the Rajput princess to the Yadava prince.

But a problem arose. Ramchandra Yadav had not paid the annual tribute to the Khiljis and to punish him, in 1308 Alauddin sent Malik Kafur. All these years Kamala had kept herself informed about her daughter Devala Devi. Now at her request, the emperor ordered Kafur to obtain Devala Devi and bring her to Delhi.

After crossing Malwa, Kafur sent a message to Rai Karan to deliver Devala Devi or face consequences. The Baghela spurned the humiliating offer and prepared for defence. For two months he stood the onslaught and all attempts of the Khiljis to force a passage failed. Nevertheless Rai Karan was hard pressed.

Singhana Deo, finding Karan in pressing circumstances, renewed the offer of marriage and sent his younger brother to escort the bride to Devagiri. The Rajput king, in his helpless state, sent Devala Devi to Devagiri with a small force. Rai

Karan lost the battle and he too fled towards Devagiri hotly pursued by the enemy.

When Devala Devi was on her way to Devagiri, at about that very time, a contingent of the Muslim soldiers was returning after visiting the Ellora caves. They saw a body of troops advancing towards them and a fight ensued between the two groups. An arrow pierced a horse and the lady riding it fell down on the ground. The enemy soldiers learnt to their pleasant surprise that she was Devala Devi. They took her to their commander who sent her to Delhi to be admitted to the royal harem. Singhana, the prince of Devagiri, felt very humiliated that his bride had been taken away forcibly and he never forgot this.

At Delhi Devala Devi lived with her mother. Khizr Khan, son of Alauddin, though already married, fell in love with Devala Devi. Finally, Kamala Devi obtained Alauddin's permission to marry Devala Devi to Khizr Khan and the two were married sometime during 1313-14. They begot a son.

When Khizr Khan, as a result of Malik Kafur's conspiracy, fell from the Sultan's grace and was sent as prisoner to the Gwalior Fort, Devala Devi joined him to share his distress. But in 1318 he was murdered and the princess met the fate often destined to the beautiful women of the mediaeval times. She was taken against her will to the harem of Sultan Qutbuddin, the murderer of her husband.

K. S. Lal : *History of Khiljis*

# Padmini

(13-14th C)

Padmini or Padmavati, the queen of Rana Ratan Singh of Mewar was renowned for her beauty and intelligence. She is a legend for having preferred heroic death to disgraced existence.

In 1303 when Alauddin Khilji, the emperor of Delhi, invaded Chittor, the Rajputs offered stiff resistance but they failed to defend the fort. In order to escape pollution and captivity, the brave Rajput women, including Padmini, performed Jauhar, as was the custom, and perished in the flames. Jayasi, a Muslim poet, developed the incident into a romance in his *Padmavat*, a gist of which is given below :

Padmini was a princess of Sri Lanka. Having learnt of her beauty from a parrot, Ratan Singh, the king of Chittor went to Sri Lanka in a mendicant's garb and stayed there for twelve years. He won her love and returned with her to Chittor.

A mendicant named Raghava who once had a glimpse of Padmini carried the tale of her extraordinary charm to Alauddin, the Sultan of Delhi. The Sultan asked Ratan Singh to send his queen to the royal harem. He also laid siege to the Fort of Chittor and he and his men fought for many years but they failed to take the Fort. The Sultan then conveyed to the Rana that he would return to his capital, if he could only see Padmini's reflection in a mirror. To this the Rana agreed. Alauddin saw Padmini's reflection in the Fort. But when Alauddin was returning with the Rana, he treacherously got Ratan Singh imprisoned and took him to Delhi.

Alauddin sent a royal order to Chittor stating that the Rana could be released if Padmini was surrendered. The Rani heard of the tortures her husband was suffering and after conferring with two warriors, Gora and Badal, she left for Delhi with fully armed Rajput warriors in 1600 litters. It

was given out that Padmini was going to the royal palace with her maids. On reaching Delhi, the party asked the Sultan to favour Padmini by giving her an opportunity to have a last interview with the Rana. This was granted and the palanquins entered the place where Ratan Singh was staying. Rescuing Ratan Singh from the prison, the party took the road to Chittor escorted by Rajputs under Badal. Gora engaged the royalists and checked their movement and although he was killed this gave the Rana's party time to reach Chittor. The Rana now punished Devapala of Kumbhalgarh who had earlier tried to seduce Padmini. The Rana was wounded in the battle and sometime afterwards he died. Padmini and Nagmati, another queen, performed Sati.

Col. Tod on the other hand closes the story with the siege of Chittor. Before the final surrender of the citadel by the Rajputs, the brave Rajput women, led by Padmini, plunged themselves into the fire of Jauhar.

M.M. Jayasi : *Padmavat*

K.S. Lal : *History of Khaljis*

# Gangadevi

(14th C)

Vijayanagar compares well with Amaravati, the celestial capital, its gates are like Meru, gardens like resorts in spring hillocks full of sports, and lakes and clean bungalows feast for eyes. It is the home of all wealth, garden of all good things.

—Gangadevi

The above is a short description of the city of Vijayanagar by the princess Gangadevi, one of the greatest woman Sanskrit writers of all times. She was wife of Kumar Kampana, second son of Bukka who with his brother Harihar had founded the empire of Vijayanagar.

Bukka succeeded Harithar, consolidated and strengthened the empire and ruled from 1356 to 1377. He eliminated unruly elements. His son Kampana who was governor of the southern territory, conducted campaigns and succeeded in subduing the refractory chiefs. Gangadevi had accompanied her husband on these campaigns and she described his heroic deeds in *Madhuravijayam* or *Veerakampanacharita*.

Gangadevi's narrative is simple and charming in Vaidarbhi style. The poem begins with the birth and parentage of Kampana who in his youth is married to Gangadevi. Soon after the prince has to proceed with his consort towards the south. He defeated the Arcot ruler, established a good government in Kanchipuram, and later defeated the Sultan and took possession of Madurai. At this point the manuscript breaks off abruptly. The poem is extant today only as a fragment because only 8 cantos and a part of the 9th are available. Even in this many verses are lost and what is so strange is that only one manuscript has been found so far. The poem is, however, of great historical importance.

Gangadevi was a pupil of Vishwanath and admired the poetry of Tikkana-Somayaji which resembled the 'moonlight drunk with avidity by thirsty poets like Chakora birds'.

# Lal Ded

(14th C)

Lal Ded, or Lalleshwari, was a mystic poetess of Kashmir, and after about six centuries even today her name is a house-hold word amongst both Muslims and Hindus of that State. Not only that she has been described by some as 'the Prophetess' and a 'Predecessor of the Medieval reformers of India—Ramanand, Kabir and the others—of the 15th and later centuries'.

Lal's life is shrouded in miracles and legends. She was born in a Kashmiri Pandit family at Pandrenath, near Srinagar. At the age of 12, she was married to a man of the same village. According to tradition, they never lived together as wife and husband. Lal became an ardent devotee of Siva and adopted a famous Kashmiri saint as her spiritual guide. She was a *yogini* and wandered about preaching the yoga as a means for the ultimate absorption into the Almighty. Yet she also preached eclectic doctrines from the depth of her mystic experiences.

Lal asserted that in essence the human soul is one with God and 'He is the only reality behind the changing phenomenon of the world. He pervades and supports the universe and is also beyond it'. He is, therefore, immanent as well as transcendent.

*All my works before the self I lay  
 Setting faith and duty before pelf  
 Well for me shall be the onward way.*

She taught man's dependence on the will of the Almighty :

*Be his sin misfortune, be it guilt  
 Be the guerdon ashes, be it flowers  
 O Bhagwan, Thou blestest whom Thou wilt  
 O Bhagwan, how wondrous are Thy prowess.*

Lal's works are known as *Vakyani* and her verses, "more gnostic than lyric", form a bright specimen of Indian literature.

Sir Temple was so much impressed by her that he wrote :

*Lal though nought but a devotee  
 Daughter in truth of thy race and time  
 Thine is a song that enslaveth me  
 Son of an alien kin and clime.*

R.C. Temple : *The Words of Lal, the Prophetess*

Lalleshwari : *Vakyani*

Nicol Macnicol : *The Making of Modern India*

J.C. Chatterji : *Kashmir Shaivism*



# Mira Bai

(1498-1547)

Mira, a saint poetess of the sixteenth century, once sought an interview with another saint named Jiva Goswami. The latter refused, saying that he did not meet women. Thereupon she sent a message enquiring of him whether besides Krishna he knew of any other male in Brindaban. Since the Krishna cult to which Goswami belonged recognised Krishna as the only male, he realised his mistake and saw Mira Bai.

Mira is one of the greatest woman-saints that ever lived anywhere in the wide world. In India she was the only woman, besides Andal, who succeeded in sublimating her latent energies into mysticism. She forsook her life of luxury, dedicated herself to her beloved 'Giridhar Gopal' and expressed her feelings in exquisite songs.

Mira was born to Rao Ratan Singh of Koorki village in Nagaur district of Rajasthan in 1498. Even as a child she revealed devotional leanings. At the age of 18 she was married to Bhoja, the heir apparent of Rana of Chittorgarh. But unfortunately within a few years of their conjugal life he passed away. Miseries added to her lot when soon thereafter her father too died in a battle. A little later her father-in-law was put to death by a scheming prince. All these events made her life bitter and dejected and she now devoted all her time to the *bhakti* of Giridhar Gopal. She mixed freely with the Sadhus and gave them alms, which was not to the liking of her relations. They subjected her to ceaseless persecution. It is said that once her brother-in-law, the Rana sent her a cup of poison, saying it was holy water. Mira drank it but nothing happened to her. On another occasion, the Rana sent her a snake in a basket saying that it contained flowers for the God. This time too she survived. Finally, Mira fled from Chittor to Brindaban and thence to Dwarka.

Mira was deeply influenced by the Bhagvat and Gita

Govinda and by the life of Narsimha Mehta. She perhaps met the followers of Vallabha and Chaitanya also.

In respect of faith Mira was nearer to Ramananda than to the Vaishnavism of Vallabha. She was influenced by the teachings of Raidas, one of the spiritual successors of Ramananda.

Mira passed away at Dwarka in 1547.

Mira Bai's real eminence lay in her *bhakti*, poetry came next. Her lyrics, graceful and melodious, are full of intense devotion to Krishna. Here is one of her verses :

*God (Krishna) hath entwined my soul O Mother !*

*With his attributes and I have sung of them.*

*The sharp arrow of his love hath pierced my body through and through, O Mother :*

*When it struck me I knew it not; now it cannot be endured, O Mother !*

*Though I use charms: incantation and drugs; the pain will not depart.*

*Is there anyone who will treat me ? Intense is the agony O Mother !*

*Thou, O God, art near; thou art not distant;*

*Come quickly to meet me.*

*With Mira, the Lord, the mountain-wielder, who is compassionate, hath quenched the fire of my body, O Mother !*

*The lotus-eyed hath entwined my soul with the twine of his attributes.*

**Moghul**

# Gulbadan Begum

(1523-1603)

Gulbadan Begum is well known for the authentic account of her time she has given in *Humayunnama*. Written in simple Persian, the work has no literary pretension. Yet it is of great human interest for its remarkable presentation of the intimate life of Humayun, the Moghul emperor, and other members of his family. The work is also a source of information about economic conditions of contemporary India.

Gulbadan Begum possessed considerable poetic talent but unfortunately her verses have not been preserved.

Gulbadan Begum was a daughter of Babur, the Moghul emperor, from his wife Dildar Begum. She was adopted by Babur's first queen Maham Begum, mother of Humayun. Both Babur and Humayun and still later Akbar had deep affection for Gulbadan Begum.

Gulbadan received a good education and was given in marriage to Khidr Khwaja. They had a daughter named Ruqayya Sultan who was married to Emperor Akbar.

Gulbadan was religious minded and in 1575, despite Akbar's protests, she went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The journey was not easy and it took her two years to reach Mecca. For the next over three years, she stayed in Hijaz and gave large charities. After another hazardous journey, she returned to India.

Gulbadan Begum spent the last few years of her life in charitable deeds and passed away at the age of 80. Her death was a great blow to Akbar as she had given him sound advice and often helped him in solving many knotty problems. In 1603 Akbar not only accompanied her bier but also carried it on his shoulders for part of the journey.

Harishankar Shrivastava : *Humayun* (Hindi)

Ishwari Prasad : *Life and Times of Humayun*

S.K. Banerji : *Humayun Badshah*

# Durgavati

(1527-1564)

In valour against foes, benevolence towards subjects, few could match Rani Durgavati, the Queen of Gondwana, and that is why even after four centuries her name is remembered with reverence and gratitude by the people of that region. Legends abound galore about her.

Durgavati was the only child of her father, Kirat Rai, the Chandella king of Mahoba. The Chandellas were at one time a great power but by the time of Kirat Rai, their influence had declined, mainly because of the expansionist policies of the contemporary Muslim rulers. Durgavati imbibed from her father the qualities of bravery and foresight and at a very young age she developed into a crack-shot. Hunting was her pastime.

It is rarely remembered that Kirat Rai gave Sher Shah Suri a tough battle when the latter besieged the Chandella fort of Kalinjar in 1545 and that both died—Kirat Rai in the battle and Sher Shah by burns from an explosion.

There are different versions of the matrimonial alliance of Durgavati with Raja Dalpat Shah of Garha Mandala (or Gondwana). One version is that her father, a Rajput, in his days of adversity married Durgavati in a caste, Gond, lower than his. Another accounts that the beautiful Chandella princess so manoeuvred that the handsome prince of the big state of Gondwana carried her away.

Dalpat Shah and Durgavati led a happy life and their joy knew no bound when they begot a son whom they named Vir Narayan. But within a short time Dalpat Shah died of a disease, leaving behind a large kingdom, a widow and an infant prince.

Durgavati did not lose her heart in this calamity. She carried on, as regent to Vir Narayan, the administration of the kingdom with the assistance of Adharsingh, the prime minister

and conducted various reforms and welfare activities. She got excavated many tanks and built temples.

Durgavati maintained the integrity of her kingdom under odd and trying circumstances. The designs of the kings of Malwa and Bengal failed to frighten her and several times she defeated Baj Bahadur, the king of Malwa.

But in 1564 Akbar's general Asaf Khan made an entirely unprovoked invasion on Gondwana. The Rani, accompanied by Vir Narayan, opposed the invaders and fought a pitched battle near Narhi. Unfortunately on the second day of the battle, Vir Narayan received a wound and had to be escorted out of the battle field to safety by a body of troops which weakened her fighting force. Durgavati too was wounded. But rather than suffer the disgrace and ignominy at the enemy's hands, she stabbed herself to death. Vir Narayan, though wounded, gave a stout resistance. But he was killed and the Gondwana passed under the control of the Moghuls.

Asaf Khan took rich spoils, including jewels, gold, silver and over 1000 elephants. He misappropriated much of the booty to himself and surrendered a very small fraction of it to Akbar. The large booty showed how efficient Durgavati's administration had been. V. A. Smith writes, she 'deservedly won the hearts of her people. Her name is still remembered and revered'.

# Chand Bibi

(1547-1599)

Chand Bibi is one of the most gallant women in the history of India. She combined gallantry and wisdom in her person and touched by her sagacity in defence of Ahmednagar the chivalorous invading Moghul prince Murad conferred on her the title 'Chand Sultana', i.e. Chand, the Queen.

Chand Bibi was a daughter of Sultan Hussain Nizam Shah of Ahmednagar. At a very young age, she was married to Ali Adil Shah, the Sultan of Bijapur. Adil Shah consulted her in all administrative matters and reviewed parades with her. She took keen interest in military campaigns. On the Sultan's death (he was murdered) in 1580, his young nephew Ibrahim Adil Shah II was raised to the throne under the guardianship of Chand Bibi and she gave him sound training. The state was entrusted to the care of Kamil Khan, who was not a scrupulous fellow and tried to seduce Chand Bibi and usurp the throne. But the lady scornfully rejected the wooer's suit, overthrew him, and had another person, Kishwar Khan appointed as the regent. The new regent fared no better. He drove her out, with the connivance of others, from the royal harem and confined her in the fortress of Satara. Fortunately her people freed her, and restored her to former position. The third person selected by her as minister too did not behave well and she had to remove him. She tried to improve the affairs of the state but found it difficult to adjust to the turbulent nobles of Bijapur. Disgusted in 1584 she left for Ahmednagar where she lived for twelve years. She returned to Bijapur only when the people of that city invited her with one voice to defend them from the attack of the Moghul army under Murad. She declared her nephew, Bahadur Khan as king and assumed the government on his behalf.

Chand Bibi brought order. With veil on face but sword in hand, she directed the army, cheered the garrison and

compelled the Moghul army to raise the siege. When prince Murad sought to mine the walls, with her own hands she removed the powder from two mines and showed her troops how to countermine. When the enemy succeeded in exploding the third mine—thereby felling several parts of the fort—and her chief officers fled away, she shamed them by taking their place. The Moghuls found her garrison invincible and the breach choked with the assailants' corpses. The Moghul army returned the next morning and to their wonder they saw a new wall which Chand Bibi had erected during the night. It was in appreciation of this that the Moghul prince had named her 'Chand Sultana'. But she was quite aware of her adversary's strength and when Murad offered to withdraw his troops in return for the cession of Berar, she accepted the offer and the Moghul army returned.

But there was treachery for her in Ahmednagar. One Mohamed Khan, whom she had appointed as Peshwa, tried to usurp the throne. He beseeched Khan-Khana, the new governor of Berar for help, promising in return to hold Ahmednagar as a vassal to the Delhi empire. The Moghul horse tried to take advantage and marched towards the city. But when it neared the city, the mob came to know of Mohamed Khan's treachery and rose against him. It restored the government to the dauntless lady and affairs of the state again improved.

The dissensions among the Ahmednagar people soon afterwards gave the Moghuls another opportunity to besiege the town. Chand Bibi with all her daring conducted the defence but found the position precarious. She thought of concluding an honourable peace with the Moghuls. But a eunuch named Hamid Khan betrayed her. He ran through streets shouting that Chand Bibi had betrayed the people to the Moghuls. The credulous garrison rushed to the fort, seized Chand Bibi and executed her. After her death, the city was stormed by the imperialists who put the defenders to the sword and the kingdom of Ahmednagar became a part of the Moghul empire.

Chand Bibi was not only a military genius and good administrator, but she was also a good scholar of Arabic and Persian and a patron of scholars.



# Rupmati

(16th C)

Rupmati, wife of Baz Bahadur, king of Malwa, was renowned for her beauty and charm. She was a poetess and musician of no mean order; her husband also was a great musician. The two sang to each other songs of love they composed; they also listened to the songs of love and war from musicians and dancing girls. Rupmati kept 'her self pure, chaste and loyal' and her love turned into a legend. She was known as the Lady of the Lotus.

About her love for Baz Bahadur, Rupmati says in a couplet,

*For the keys in mine own keeping  
Day by day it grows a little  
Never loses even a little  
But through life will ever go  
With Baz Bahadur weal or woe.*

Rupmati was daughter of Than Singh Rathore (or Jadu Rai) of Dharmapuri situated on the banks of the Rewa in Madhya Pradesh. 'The music of the river had passed into her soul' and her skill in plying upon the 'bin' and song was unsurpassed. Once on a hunting spree, Baz Bahadur heard her singing and was so much charmed by her sweet face, that he eloped with her. 'Fifteen were the years when at the altar of her eyebrows the throne of sovereignty was offered in sacrifice.'

Her beauty was described: "The beauty of the tresses of the moon-faced maiden was like unto the dark coils of a chain falling to the ground. Her head was the tent of Laila. The dividing line of her head was the river Ganges in the land of Ind. Her forehead a facet of the diamond, her eye brows like sword of Ali. The beauty of her eyes cometh not within the compass of description. Her glance is like unto a magic thread and unto the guardian of a tavern of wine. The nose is like the line of the equator...the beauty of her cheeks (like)

the fire that descended upon Moses, the lips lumps of sugar, her mouth a bag of sugar."

And, when the lovers were deep in love, the news of Akbar's victories reached Mandu. 'Rupmati advised her lover to sacrifice pleasure and luxury for a season and to bestir himself to set the affairs of his kingdom in order. Bazid Khan (that was the name of Baz Bahadur) collected his army and drew it up in an array at Sarangpur to give a battle to Adham Khan, the commander of the Moghul army. But Bahadur was no match; he lost and escaped towards Khandesh.

When Adam Khan reached Mandu he became the master of its treasures and turned his fancy to the possession of noble ladies in the harem of the king. He asked Rupmati to transfer her love to the conqueror of the land, adding, "If my end be not attained peaceably, by force can a way be made." But Rupmati had resolved not to yield and she escaped as a flower seller. This was detected and after three days Adham Khan's soliders captured her. Rupmati's relatives, who had gathered, resisted the Moghul army but they failed. Her brothers were killed in the conflict. When she was brought back to Mandu her brother's death weighed heavily on her. She looked into the heart of the women of the harem and found that all were willing to give up their old dignity and fortune to win new. Rupmati consented to receive Adham Khan after three days. But then she had resolved to make choice of the doom of death before converse of love.

On the third day Adham Khan celebrated his victory and caused royal palace to be garnished for the entry. Rupmati adorned herself with the bridal dress which Baz Bahadur had given her. She took her 'bin' and sang songs 'to melt the hearts till she was beside herself; then she retired to the bed chamber and quaffed a cup of deadly poison of powdered diamond. When Adham Khan reached the palace he found the fair lady asleep. He took her hand and sought to awaken her from sweet slumber. But the bird of the soul had taken flight from the cage of mortality'. The tyrant found no way open but to return.

Rupmati died a martyr to faithfulness and an example to the sect of lovers. She proved what Amir Khan had said:

*Khusru, in love rival the Hindu wife*

*For the dead's sake burns herself alive.*

# Haba Khatoon

(1554-1609)

*A village damsel has enthralled the world  
The season of love has begun.*

This proposal was made by king Yusaf Shah Chak of Kashmir to a peasant girl, Haba Khatoon. She replied :

*But my king! the shadows of night are approaching  
And my lord is alone at home and I must repair.*

The girl had hinted to the king that she was married.

Haba Khatoon's fame for her lyrical poetry has endured 400 years. Her poetry vibrates with passion, her songs are popular amongst the people of Kashmir and her name is a house-hold word.

Haba was born daughter of Abdul Rather, a poor peasant of Chandrahara village, near Srinagar, in the middle of the 16th century. A prodigy, she was not satisfied with the traditional education in the Madrasa attached to the local mosque and read the classics of Sheikh Sadi. She composed verses and her fame as a singer spread to the neighbouring villages.

These poetic and musical inclinations of the daughter were not to the liking of Abdul Rather. With a view to stopping these he married her off to a peasant boy. Her mother-in-law as well her husband did not approve of her singing of love lyrics and consequently her married life was not at all happy. To forget troubles, Haba would often go to the saffron fields on the banks of the Jhelum where she poured her heart in songs of love. A fortune-teller once told her that her sad home life would soon end and that she would be known as Zooni (meaning moon) by which name she is still known in the Valley of Kashmir.

Then one day while she was singing in the fields of saffron, king Yusaf Shah Chak, an ardent lover of music, passed that way. He heard Haba's golden voice and was enchanted with her voice. The encounter developed into a

romance. The king arranged her divorce by paying her husband 5000 drams. At the age of 18, the poor peasant girl became the queen of Kashmir,

Haba spent the next 14 years with Yusaf Shah. When in 1586 he was captured and imprisoned by Akbar, to avoid ignominy, Haba left the royal palace and wandered over the hills and lakes. Finally she built a small cottage and for the next two decades suffered anguish and sorrow. At the age of 55 Haba breathed her last.

Haba composed *lols*, a form of love lyric which is sung with a musical instrument. Generally of ten lines, a *lol* has its first two lines for refrain. Its theme is romantic love. Haba's emotions have found expression in a language of naivete and the songs are full of musical quality. Here is a *lol* from her.

*I've waited long and patiently*

*My heart is numb and idle and bereft of hopes,*

*Sweet is the ritual of love,*

*I would adorn my love with fragrant kisses*

*And offer him wine in golden goblets.*

# Nurjahan

(—1646)

'I only require a seer of wine and half a seer of meat. It is impossible to describe the beauty and wisdom of the queen Nurjahan. The sovereign granted Nurjahan the rights of sovereignty and government'. The coins struck in her name were superscribed with, 'By the order of King Jahangir, gold has a hundred splendours added to it by receiving the impression of Nurjahan, the Queen Begum.' The firmans too had appended her signatures with those of the emperor's.

Nurjahan (her original name was Mihr-un-nisa) was the daughter of a Persian noble Mirza Ghias Beg who came to India in Akbar's time in search of fortune. On way to India, his wife gave birth to a daughter who brought them luck. They were well received in the royal court. The father was a man of literary ability and from him the daughter inherited the quality and taste for literature and fine arts.

At the age of 17, Mihrunnisa was married to Ali Quli, titled Sher Afghan, the governor of Burdwan. From him she got a daughter. In 1607 Sher Afghan was killed in a fight against the emissaries of the Moghul emperor, and the widow Mehrunnisa was brought to the imperial harem.

The exquisite beauty of Mihr-un-nisa attracted Jahangir and he married her in 1611. Her name was changed first to Nurmahal (The Light of the Palace) and then to Nurjahan (The Light of the World).

Nurjahan possessed qualities of head and gained fame for charitable deeds and innovations in food, jewellery and dress. Clever as she was, her influence increased day after day. Lands could be granted only under her seal. Nobles sometimes presented themselves to take orders from her. She bore no child to Jahangir and strengthened her position at court through matrimonial alliances as well as by appointing close relations in the inner circle of the emperor. Her father Ghias

Beg and brother Asaf Khan rose to high positions. Her niece, the future Mumtaz, was married to Prince Khurram and she gave her daughter by her first husband in marriage to Prince Shahriyar, the emperor's youngest son.

She tried that Shahriyar should succeed as emperor. But in this she was opposed by Mahabat Khan and prince Khurram. In a surprise attack Mahabat Khan surrounded the emperor's camp and made him a prisoner. Nurjahan somehow managed to escape. She made attempts to rescue the emperor but she failed. She then skillfully played upon the feelings of Mahabat Khan and lulled his suspicions to such an extent that she and Jahangir could escape to Rohtas. Now Mahabat Khan found his position weak and he wisely surrendered.

In addition to her uncommon beauty, Nurjahan possessed a sharp intellect, tact, sound common sense, and an unusual versatility in arts and literature. She was Jahangir's constant companion and shared his delight in sports. In 1619 with one shot she killed a tiger which was distressing the inhabitants of Fatehpur Sikri. Jahangir was a habitual drinker and she exercised restraint on his habit.

Nurjahan's artistic taste is illustrated by the beautiful tomb (Itimad-ud-aula) of her father that she built at Agra in 1628. The tomb built of white marble is decorated with *pietra dura* work in semi-precious stones. The monument is known for its delicacy of treatment and quality decorations. She also laid the Shalamar Gardens in Kashmir.

When Jahangir died in 1627, Nurjahan sent a message to Shahriyar to collect as many soldiers as possible and to hasten to the capital. But her brother Asaf Khan favoured his son-in-law Shahjahan and placed Nurjahan practically in the position of a prisoner. In the war that ensued Sahariyar was defeated. *Having lost the hope*, Nurjahan returned to Lahore where she died in 1646. She lies buried in an unpretentious tomb, not far from her husband's splendid mausoleum. The tomb bears a pathetic inscription :

*On our lone grave no roses bloom  
No nightangle would sing  
No friendly lamp dispels the gloom  
No moth ever burns its wing !*

The invention of attar is associated with her.

# Mumtaz Mahal

(1593-1631)

Mumtaz Mahal was the favourite queen of Shahjahan and on her death, the emperor built the Taj Mahal to perpetuate her memory. A historian has observed, 'Nothing like that was built or has ever been conceived in the whole history of Indian sculpture'.

Mumtaz Mahal (original name Arjumand Bano) was daughter of Asaf Khan and niece of Nurjahan, later to be the queen empress. She was a girl of extraordinary beauty and charm and at the age of 19 was married to prince Khurram, the heir apparent. She was devoted to him and shared prosperity as well as adversity with him. Shahjahan gave her titles of Mumtaz Mahal and Aliya Begum. On Shahjahan's coronation in 1628, she became the empress and he bestowed on her a large allowance.

Mumtaz Mahal was a devout Muslim and helped the poor and needy. Often she pleaded with her husband for financial assistance to widows, orphans and poor marriageable girls. The emperor valued her advice and consulted her in important state matters.

Mumtaz was soft hearted but when the Portuguese pirates captured her slave girls, she avowed vengeance. On the emperor's orders, the tormentors were smashed from their settlement at Hugli.

Mumtaz Mahal gave birth to fourteen children—six daughters and eight sons, of whom 4 sons Dara Shukosh, Shujah, Murad and Aurangzeb, and daughters Jahanara and Roshnara survived. At the age of 39 while giving birth to a child, she breathed her last at Burhanpur. (Her body was later removed to Agra and the Taj Mahal was built on her tomb). On her death Shahjahan was full of sorrow and lamented 'life has no taste for me now'.

Shahjahan then conceived the idea of perpetuating the

memory of his beloved by building a monument of eternal beauty. Mumtaz Mahal was dead but she would live for ever. The renowned architects of the time were invited to design the monument. According to Indian chroniclers, Ustad Isa of Shiraz designed the Taj Mahal. The resources of the empire were placed at his disposal. Artisans and material were brought from various places and twenty thousand men worked for seventeen years to complete the Taj Mahal.

'Its extreme delicacy, architectural grandeur, perfect taste, artistic bulbous domes, beautifully carved screens and chaste in-lay work defy description'.

Though Shahjahan survived Mumtaz Mahal by 35 years, he never married again. Hundreds of thousands of men and women flock to Agra to see this 'poem in stone'.

J.N. Chaudhrie : *Mumtaz Mahal*

(Islamic culture Vol XI)



Deserted by her husband, Jijabai now found solace in Shivaji and lavished all her affection on him. She constantly reminded him that he had descended from the Yadavas of Devagiri and the Ranas of Udaipur. She also made him pray constantly at the little village shrine and under her influence, Shivaji at 18 developed into a tireless, fearless and deeply devout. She fired him with the idea of a free Maharashtra and also imbued him with tolerance, justice and fair play so that Shivaji would have at heart the common weal and progress of his subjects. At one time Shivaji wanted to lead the life of a religious devotee and joined Tukaram, but she rescued him and Shivaji returned to his duties as a warrior and prince. She inspired him to lead one victory after another.

In 1659 when Afjal Khan volunteered and came to destroy Shivaji and the latter agreed to meet him, Jijabai, though reluctantly, let him go. When Shahji came to Shivaji as an envoy of the king of Bijapur, Shivaji and Jijabai showed him all respects.

In 1664 when Shahji died, Jijabai wanted to be *sati* but Shivaji dissuaded her from the course.

Jijabai often goaded her son to attempt difficult jobs. On her advice Shivaji took over the well protected forts of Kondana and Sinhgad. She taught him religious tolerance and to respect women. Shivaji's army as is well known showed courtesy and respect to women.

Two years later in 1666 Shivaji accepted Aurangzeb's invitation and decided to go to the Moghul court. He entrusted the state to Jijabai and three friends of his. She was also to look after Shivaji's wives and second son Rajaram.

Jijabai respected religious sentiments of others and was opposed to forcible conversion. She did not subscribe to the idea that a convert was lost to his religion for ever, in spite of his feeling to the contrary. She reconverted Balaji Nimbalkar to Hinduism and to show that he was no way inferior, she gave him her grand daughter Sakhubai in marriage.

Jijabai advised Shivaji to take the royal crown not from the hands of a Moghul emperor, but from a priest of Banaras. Shivaji was crowned in 1674 in her presence. Shortly after this, Jijabai fell ill and died in the village of Pachad.

# Jahanara

(17th C)

*Cover not my grave save with green grass  
For such a covering alone befits  
The tomb of the lowly in spirit.*

—Jahanara

This is the rendering of a Persian couplet of Jahanara inscribed on her tomb stone as was her wish.

Jahanara was the most loved child of Shahjahan and Mumtaz Mahal. She was liberal like her brother Dara and the two, Dara and Jahanara, had great affection for each other.

Mumtaz Mahal died in 1631 leaving behind Shahjahan heart broken. It was Jahanara's care that saved him from domestic worries. Her gentleness soothed his troubled mind and her 'kindness healed discords in the imperial family'. Being the eldest princess royal, she ruled her father's household and the emperor gave her titles of Begum Sahib and Padshah Begum. At her instance, he extended help to orphans, widows and the poor. She was well read in Persian and Arabic and her intellectual interests helped the emperor in bad days.

In 1644 Jahanara met a very serious accident. One day when she was returning after meeting her father in the Agra Fort, her muslin skirt caught fire and within no time she was engulfed by flames and severely burnt. Shahjahan, in anguish, neglected even his state affairs so that he may be able to look after his daughter. Physicians of note from far and near laboured hard to heal her wounds but to no avail and for months the princess hovered between life and death. An European physician, it was said, cured her and pleased with him the emperor granted the foreigner's country the permission to trade in India. Finally an ointment prepared by a slave named Arif healed Jahanara's sores.

Shahjahan was full of joy at his daughter's recovery and on 25 November held grand celebrations. He gave her costly presents including jewels worth rupees ten lakhs. Sometime

later, at her request he restored Aurangzeb to his former rank which had been earlier taken away from him because of his rebellion against the emperor.

Jahanara was young and had her weaknesses also. Though guarded in the harem, once in a while she succeeded in having young men smuggled into her chambers. The incidents reached Shahjahan's ears and this had disastrous results for the young men. They lost their lives.

Shahjahan's fond love for Dara created jealousy amongst the brothers. When the war of succession started between the Moghul princes, Jahanara tried hard to dissuade Aurangzeb and Murad from the fratricidal war. But they were adamant at fighting out. Jahanara supported Dara and Roshanara favoured Aurangzeb. In the ensuing battle of Samugarh, Dara lost. Jahanara visited Aurangzeb's camp on 10 June with a proposal of peace and told him of their father's wish to partition the empire between the four princes. But Aurangzeb refused to accept the proposal and took the emperor as captive. Jahanara rebuked him for his unnatural conduct and devoted herself to the service of her imprisoned father.

Shahjahan's captivity imposed on Jahanara a life of suffering which she bore gladly. (Some chroniclers state that their attachment was blended with crime.) She tried repeatedly to reconcile her father and brother but Aurangzeb turned a deaf ear. Shahjahan never forgave him. But when he was dying, at Jahanara's request, he signed a formal pardon to Aurangzeb. On her part Jahanara fulfilled the last desire of her father to look after his surviving wives and daughters.

After Shahjahan's death, Aurangzeb restored Jahanara to her old place as the first lady of the court. She occupied this position till her end. He was considerate to her and occasionally called 'on her in Delhi to which place she had moved in 1666. She took keen interest in the family affairs and arranged marriages of the children of Dara and Murad. Jahanara's age and position enabled her to give Aurangzeb unpleasant but sound advice when no one dared to do so.

On 6 September 1681 Jahanara died a spinster. She was buried in a simple grave in Nizamuddin, near Delhi. Aurangzeb mourned her death and ordered her name to be entered as 'the Mistress of the Age' (*Sahibat-u-Zamani*).

# Zeb-un-Nisa

(1638-1702)

Zeb-un-Nisa is known for her collection of a valuable library, patronage to literary persons, and being a gifted poetess.

Zeb-un-Nisa was born daughter of emperor Aurangzeb and his principal wife Dilras Banu Begum on 15 February 1638 at Daulatabad. In her young age, she was educated by a Persian tutoress in the harem. She mastered Arabic and theology and grew up to be an Arabic and Persian scholar. She inherited the sharpness of her father's intellect and the family's taste for literature. She committed to memory the Quran and for this she was awarded handsomely by her father.

Zeb-un-Nisa wrote elegant verses in Persian, full of pathos, and composed a volume of odes and quatrains under the pen-name of *Makhfi* i.e. the concealed one. Some historians, however, doubt her authorship of the *Diwane Makhfi* as they think it could have been done by some other Makhfi—the pseudonym had been used by many poets. Secondly, the authorship might have been inscribed to her by some grateful scholar supported by her. Mukhfi Safi-ud-din Ardbeli, for instance, translated the Arabic *Great Commentary* under the title of Zeb-ut-tafasir. Some 'tracts and works also unjustly bear her name'.

Zeb-un-Nisa spent most of her time in the pursuit of knowledge. She was fond of books and collected a valuable library which surpassed all private collections. She employed many scholars to produce literary works and to copy manuscripts. She also patronised many poets which compensated for Aurangzeb's dislike of poetry.

Zeb-un-Nisa was fond of gardens and she herself laid out a garden named Charbag, near Lahore, which too was the scene of her literary efforts.

Although Zeb-un-Nisa remained a spinster and led a

pious life, a scandal imputes her name with an illicit love affair with Aqil Khan, a noble of her father's court. But the story is inconsistent with the recorded history.

Zeb-un-Nisa was an ardent partisan of her younger brother Muhammed Akbar. She was in secret correspondence with him on the eve of his rebellion. When the uprising failed and her letters were discovered, she had to bear the brunt of her father's wrath. Her property and annual pension (of Rs. 4 lakhs) were attached. In those dark days her literary studies must have lighted her captivity.

Zeb-un-Nisa passed away on 26 May 1702. Aurangzeb shed tears and ordered money to be distributed in charity for the good of his daughter's soul. He built a tomb for her remains in the 'Garden of 30,000 Trees' outside the Kabuli Gate of Delhi.

Sarkar : *Studies in Mughal India*

Butenschon : *The life of the Mughal Princess*

Lal Magan : *Dewan of Zebunnissa*

R.P. Tripathi : *Rise and Fall of the Mughal Empire*

Jahandar Shah ordered the wazir to punish the offender. But the nobles of Delhi stood solidly behind Qilich Khan and alarmed at the turn of events, Jahandar Shah had to take back his order.

But soon Jahandar Shah faced a trouble. Faruqsiyar contested his claim to the throne. While the battle was on, Lal Kunwar and Jahandar Shah fled to Agra. They were captured and taken prisoner. Jahandar Shah was executed in 1713 and Lal Kunwar was sent to Sohagpura, a bustee for the widows of deceased emperors. There she passed her days on monthly allowance received from the government.

William Irvine : *Later Moghuls*

Rekha Misra : *Women in Mughal India*

# Mastani

(18th C)

*Know you, Bajirao, I am in the same sad plight in which the famous elephant was when it was caught by the crocodile. The valiant race of the Bundelas is losing. Come and save my honour.<sup>1</sup>*

This appeal of the Bundela king Chhatrasal to Peshwa Bajirao I in 1729 against the harassment of Moghuls did not go unheeded. The Peshwa by forced marches reached Mahoba with his army and was met by the Bundela king. The combined forces of the Marathas and the Bundelas routed Muhammed Khan Bangash, the Moghul Subedar of Allahabad. The latter was allowed to return to his headquarters on giving an undertaking that he would never again return to Bundelkhand nor would he harass Chhatrasal.

The aged Chhatrasal was grateful to the Peshwa and lavished on him honours and riches, including a jagir in perpetuity. He also presented to him the most charming woman of the time named Mastani.

The origin of Mastani is shrouded in mystery. Tradition makes her the offspring of a Hindu father and Mohammedan mother. *Tarikh-i-Mohammadshahi* mentions that she was highly accomplished in dancing (she was a *Kanchana*) and skilled in riding and handling the sword.

M.G. Ranade on the other hand says that Mastani was the daughter of the Nizam of Hyderabad and that the Begum had proposed his daughter's marriage to cement friendship between the Nizam and the Peshwa. The marriage was celebrated with a dagger and Bajirao later brought Mastani to Poona and housed her in a mansion, especially built for her.

After enjoying the hospitality of Chhatrasal for a while, Bajirao left with Mastani for Pune on 23 May 1729. She was

1. जो गति गस्त गजेन्द्र की सो गति जानहु बाज ।

बाजी जात बुदेलन की राखो बाजी सार ॥

adept in music and gave public performances during the Ganapati celebrations in the palace. Bajirao was infatuated with her and in 1730 he added a portion to the Shanwar Wada (palace) that he built in Pune, and named it after his lady love. Mastani dressed and lived in Hindu fashion and looked after Bajirao's comforts with the devotion of a wife. She accompanied him in his campaigns and her company inspired Bajirao. In 1734 Mastani bore Bajirao a son who was named Shamsher Bahadur. (Later Bajirao transferred to Shamsher Bahadur part of the jagir he had received from Chhatrasal and Shamsher became famous as the Nawab of Banda. Chhatrasal had expired on 14 December 1731.)

Bajirao had two sons, Raghunath Rao and Sadashiv Rao, from his Hindu wife Kashi Bai. The favour shown by Bajirao to Mastani disturbed the peace of the Peshwa family. The orthodox people as well as kith and kin of Bajirao were opposed to her as in her company he had developed taste for wine and meat. When the questions of the thread ceremony of Raghunath Rao and marriage of Sadashiv Rao came up, the Brahmins refused to conduct the ceremonies in the presence of Bajirao who they said was a degenerate. And, when Bajirao was out on a campaign, Nana Sahib and Chimnaji Appa (the latter was younger brother of Bajirao) seized Mastani and kept her in confinement. The ceremonies were concluded in early February 1740 when the Peshwa was out.

The orthodox detested Bajirao's relations with Mastani; they even wanted to do away with her. But when the consent of the king was sought for this, he objected to it strongly. Bajirao learnt of these behind the scene activities and was heart broken.

Bajirao was on a campaign against the Nizam. He defeated Nasir Jung, the eldest son of the Nizam, and concluded a formal treaty on 27 February 1740. But he was in a disturbed condition. Chimnaji Appa wrote : "I do not know what fate is in store for us. We should send her (Mastani) to him (Bajirao) upon my return to Poona".

Bajirao had been ill and Kashibai arrived to see her husband. Suddenly on 28 April 1740 Bajirao expired. His body was taken to Shanwar Wada. There are two versions about Mastani's death. According to one, as soon as Mastani



learnt of Bajirao's death, she died in the palace at Poona either by suicide or shock. Her body was removed to Pabal, which Bajirao had granted her, where her unpretentious tomb reminds passers-by of the story of her love and tragic end. The other version is : 'The Royal Mastani, the accomplished charming companion went Sati. Separated from her lover in this world, she passed fearlessly through the flames to greet him in the next. Bravest of the brave, fairest of the fair, Bajirao died like a most fascinating figure in the romance of love'.

G.S. Sardesai : *New History of the Marathas*

R.V. Nadkarni : *The Rise and Fall of the Maratha Empire*

M.G. Ranade : *Rise of the Maratha Power and Other Essays*

**Modern**

# Ahilya Bai

(1725-1795)

*In the most sober view that can be taken of character, she (Ahilya Bai) certainly appears, within her limited sphere, to have been one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed.*

—Sir John Malcolm

Self aggrandizement amongst kings was the rule and benevolence towards subjects an exception in those times of turmoil. Ahilya Bai, the Maratha ruler, was one such exception. The sheer mention of her name evoked reverence amongst people for her just rule and benevolence to humanity.

Ahilya Bai was born in 1725 in an ordinary family in a village in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. Her father Mankoji Shinde married her at the age of 8 to Khande Rao, the only son of Malhar Rao Holkar. From her very childhood she had a religious bent of mind. Khande Rao died in 1754 in a battle leaving behind his young wife, a minor son Malerao and aged father. Since time hung on the young widow, at her father-in-law's persuasion she interested herself in administration and manufacture of small armament.

But tragedies followed her. Her father-in-law died in 1766 and the 22-year old son passed away within a year of this. In 1767 she succeeded to the Holker jagirs. Though very unhappy because of the tragedies, she did not lose heart and maintained her poise. She acted independently. She refused to accept minister Chandrachood's advice to adopt a child. She read through his ulterior motive and took upon herself the task of administration. She appointed a trusted person as her commander-in-chief and the latter served her faithfully and zealously. She permitted none to exploit her for being a woman and whenever occasion demanded, she was firm and unwavering and inflicted adequate punishment on malefactors. She administered her subjects with justice and piety. She appreciated good work and was generous to a fault. She

succeeded in consolidating the territories.

Ahilya Bai followed a policy of conciliation and resort to coercion only as a last remedy. To preserve her possessions and territories she developed excellent relations with the Peshwa and the confederacy of the 12 ministers, including P. Fadnavis and Mahadaji Scindia. She was opposed to Raghu Dada who tried to play foul with her. The Nizam and the Sultan respected Ahilya Bai for her piety.

Ahilya Bai was a woman of principles and believed in strictly clean administration and justice. She was pious and virtuous. She created funds for charities but these were kept separately from the public funds and the two were not allowed to be mixed up. In her daily life she started with religious duties first and the affairs of state came next. Her private life was spotless. 'Every act was done under guidance and fear of the law of God and with consideration of piety and virtue'. She was popular with all her subjects.

Ahilya Bai passed away on 13 August 1795. Her charities in the far flung corners of the country—at the shrines in the Himalayas, at Rameshwaram and Dwarka at the sea-coast and at Varanasi and other places in the interior have helped innumerable pilgrims.

Mrs. Joanna Bailie has written tellingly about Ahilya Bai: *Yea, even children at their mother's feet*

*Are taught such homely rhyming to repeat*

*In better days from Brahma came,*

*To rule our land, a noble dame,*

*Kind was heart, and bright her fame*

*And Ahilya was her honoured name.*

*For thirty years her reign of peace,*

*The land in blessings did increase,*

*And she was blessed by every tongue,*

*By stern and gentle, old and young*

*And where her works of love remain,*

*On mountain, pass or hill or plain,*

*There stops the traveller a while,*

*And eyes with a mournful side,*

*With muttering lips, that seem to say*

*This was the work of Ahilya Bai.*

Grant Duff: *History of the Marathas*

# Begum Samroo

(1750-1836)

Begum Samroo, an adventurer par excellence, is a rare phenomenon in the context of India's history. Her career is made up of truths stranger than 'the most imaginative romance'. From abject poverty and obscurity, she rose to be an independent ruler and even proved a shield to her contemporary Moghul king, Shah Alam. In times when old and powerful thrones were shattering she maintained her position creditably and died in the fulness of years as a saint of the Roman Catholic church.

Zeb-un-nissa (the Begum's actual name) was born in 1750 daughter of a nobleman named Luft Ali Khan of Kutana, in Meerut District. The fortune of the family took a sudden turn in 1756 when Luft Ali Khan died leaving behind his wife and daughter to fend for themselves. The two moved to Delhi to eke out a living and the girl grew up 'a radiant beauty' amidst adversity. She was so charming that when General Walter Reinhardt, nicknamed Samroo, saw her, he fell a willing victim to her. It did not take the two long to come closer and in 1765 she passed into the harem of Samroo. But she retained her faith.

How Reinhardt took the name Samroo is an interesting story. Since he bore a sober face, his friends had nicknamed him 'Sombre'. This softened in Indian tongue into 'Samroo'. Tired of an adventurer's life, Samroo joined the service of the Moghul emperor and obtained a jagir in the Gangetic doab that yielded him an annual revenue of Rs. 6 lakhs. He selected village Sardhana for his residence. A clever woman, she gradually took away the actual exercise of power from her husband and in 1778 when 'Sombre Sahib' died, she was installed in the charge of the State by the emperor Shah Alam. She took up the command of her husband's forces, attained the power of an independent ruling princess and was known as Begum Samroo.

In 1781 Begum Samroo and her step son Zafar-Yab were baptised and she was christened Joanna. She was a fearless, warrior and clever leader, and after George Thomas, another adventurer, joined her service, 'the princess of Sardhana' was a force to reckon with. In 1787 she saved the Moghul emperor from Rohilla Gulam Qadir who had made his way in the royal chamber and a little later her paltan reached safely Prince Jawan Bakht to the emperor.

But the Begum's other interests made her position weak. In 1790 a French name J Levassoult joined her army and rose in her estimation. This enraged George Thomas who had so far been close to her, and he left her service. Others too resented and an odd situation developed. She tried to flee with Levassoult but they were hotly pursued. To escape humiliation the French killed himself. But the Begum was arrested and kept tied for seven days to a gun-carriage at Sardhana. Fortunately, a former officer intervened and she was released. But she was soon at the game. She won over others and after a year she regained her jagir.

Begum Samroo was a shrewed judge and transferred her allegiance to the British then in ascendancy. But the British proved more shrewd and forced her to surrender some of her rights. Fortunately, under the agreement, she could retain the jagir for her life. Free from troubles, Begum Samroo devoted her time to religion. She built a grand church and other buildings at Sardhana and Meerut. Issueless (her step-son had died), she willed her property to David Ochterlony Dyce and Clemence Brown. On 27 January 1836, the Begum quietly passed away at Sardhana, leaving behind a property worth about Rs. 50 lakhs.

The Begum, a great adventurer, never lost her mind. To cite an instance. Once she called on Lord Lake. Lake was drunk and forgot the etiquette and kissed her in the presence of her men. The soldiers looked astonished. To them she very casually said, 'It is the salute of a padre to his daughter'. The soldiers did not question her version.

# Rani Channamma

(1778-1828)

"It is not to one's credit to fall into the hands of the white persons and be done to death. It's much wiser to enter a power magazine and give up the ghost." —Channamma

Rani Channamma was the first Indian woman crusador for independence against the British. She touched the hearts of her warriors and they offered to sacrifice their lives for her sake. They said, "We will fight till the heads of the whole opposing army fall to the ground. We had ever eaten your salt and will not forsake you now." While parading the next morning, they sang, "Let death come to us, we shall not surrender."

Rani Channamma was born daughter of Dhulappa Gowda, the Desai of Keki, and was wife of Malla Sarja, the Desai of Kittur, in Karnataka. Malla Sarja had a son, Shivaling Rudra Sarja from his other wife, Veeramma. On Malla Sarja's death Shivaling Rudra ascended the throne. But soon after he too died leaving behind no issue to succeed, though a little before his expiry, he had adopted a child. The British refused to recognise the adoption. Channamma showed tremendous courage and remarkable intelligence. She composed differences with her Sardars and at a function proclaimed the continuance of her state.

This was not to the liking of the British who intended to annex the state. The Chief Agent of Dharwar, Thackeray, assigned the work of administration to two Sardars and behaved in an unbecoming manner towards the royal family. He also tried to create dissensions amongst the people of the state. This annoyed Channamma and she decided to save the State through peaceful negotiations, if possible, and through war, if inevitable.

Channamma made an appeal to the Governor. But this had no effect. Thackeray on the other hand ordered the guns to position. He conveyed that the gates of Kittur should be

opened within 24 minutes and that if this was not done, these would be blown open. All this while the Rani was not sitting idle. She had also fortified the place and addressed the neighbouring princes for help. She was directing military operations from the rampart of the fort and when Thackeray advanced on horse to the gate, he was struck by a sally made by the Rani's escort. The Rani's soldiers seized the enemy guns, cut the British officers to pieces and executed the traitors. They also arrested a few hiding Englishmen and 40 servants of the company and would have executed them but for the Rani's intervention. The defeat of the army was a humiliation for the British but a tribute to the organising capacity of the brave queen.

When Elphinstone, the Governor of Bombay, heard of the defeat, he was wild with rage. He ordered the suppression of the fighters of Kittur and the annexation of the state. He proclaimed that those who surrendered by a fixed date would be pardoned. The Rani did not lose nerve and as a measure of goodwill she released the prisoners and treated them with courtesy.

But the British threw away their assurances to winds. On 30 November the British forces attacked the fort with 200 guns. But the going was not so easy. Both the forces suffered. It took the British 24 hours to effect breach in the Fort. Unfortunately for the Kittur warriors, their magazine was rendered useless and the gun powder was exhausted. With no hope of success and not prepared to sacrifice the life of the people in the fort, the Rani's garrison, at her instance, surrendered on 4 December 1824. The British arrested a few leaders and Kittur passed into the British control. The two Ranis were also taken prisoner and were detained at Bahhongal. She remained there for four years. Till her end, she dreamt of Kittur's independence and kept up communication with her trusted fighters and helped them financially.

The defeat of the Rani was a foregone conclusion. It was the spirit she showed that is of prime importance.

Another princess of the same name in the history of Karnataka (popularly known as Chennammaji) was noted for her nobility of character, valour and piety. She was wife of Somashekhar Nayala of Keladi. On her husband's death in



1677 she ruled the territory for 25 years. A courageous woman, she gave shelter to Rajaram, Shivaji's son who was being hotly pursued by Aurangzeb's army. She routed the Moghul army. Later she helped Rajaram to escape to Jinji which saved her state from Moghul occupation. Aurangzeb was so impressed by her that he sent her valuable gifts. In yet another battle she defeated the Mysore army. In her husband's memory she founded a town Somashekharapuram on the banks of the Tungabhadra and established permanent charities at Varanasi, Rameshwaram, Tirupati and Srishaila. She built *maths* for Lingayats and patronised both Dvaita and Advaita sects.

*Vijayanagara Sexcenetenary Commemorative Volume*

# Sada Kaur

Sada Kaur and Maharaja Ranjit Singh 'worked together and against each other', which determined the course of the Sikh history of half a century. Sada Kaur, a spirited lady and astute diplomat, was Ranjit Singh's mother-in-law.

In the last quarter of the 18th century, Punjab was fragmented into *misl*s amongst which the Kanheyas under Jai Singh of Batala and the Sukerchakias under Maha Singh of Gujranwala were the most prominent. These two *misl*s were bitter enemies and in a conflict Maha Singh killed Jai Singh's son and successor. With her husband's death, Jai Singh's widowed daughter-in-law Sada Kaur felt insecure. A clever woman that she was, with a view to securing the backing of a power, she betrothed her daughter Mehtab Kaur to Ranjit Singh, son of her husband's assassin Maha Singh.

In 1793 Maha Singh expired leaving behind his wife, two sons and daughter-in-law Sada Kaur. Assured of help from Sukerchakias, the young woman captured the Kanheya estate from her brother-in-law and mother-in-law and married Mehtab Kaur to Ranjit Singh. A power craven woman, Sada Kaur started poisoning Ranjit Singh's ears against his Dewan, Lakhpat Rai, a confidant of Ranjit Singh's mother. Her strategy was to secure the prime ministership for Dal Singh, Ranjit Singh's maternal uncle, who she thought would be grateful to her and prove a handtool. The Dewan was murdered but rather than submit to his mother-in-law's design, Ranjit Singh took the power in his own hands and in 1798 took Raj Kaur as a second wife. This hurt Sada Kaur and her daughter, and the two went back to Batala.

Sada Kaur had given considerable help and courage to Ranjit Singh and even after her departure to Batala she continued helping her son-in-law. In 1796 when Shah Zaman of Afghanistan invaded the Punjab and the Sikhs gathered at

Amritsar to discuss their withdrawal to the hills, Sada Kaur joined Ranjit Singh in exhorting the Sikhs to take a bold stand. She said that if men refused to fight, she a woman would fight alone. The appeal had its effect and Ranjit Singh was chosen to command the Sikh army against the Afghans, marched to Lahore and cleared the country-side of the enemy. Before Shah Zaman could join a battle with the Sikhs, he was called back to encounter a more serious problem and he left for Afganistan, leaving behind his army in the command of a general. The Sikhs under Ranjit Singh inflicted a defeat on the Afgan general. The second attack of Shah Zaman in 1797 proved more disastrous for the Afghans and after this Ranjit Singh was acknowledged as the leader of the Sikhs. Sada Kaur's contribution to Ranjit Singh's assumption of leadership of the Sikhs was not small.

In 1799 Sada Kaur helped Ranjit Singh in making up his mind to take over Lahore on the invitation of its citizens. This invested Ranjit Singh with the semblance of a title to the Maharaja. About this time the English were apprehensive of the Afghans with whom Ranjit Singh's relations had improved and they sent their emissary to Sada Kaur to wean away Ranjit Singh from the Afghans. She arranged a meeting of the British representatives with Ranjit Singh which did not prove fruitful.

The rift between Sada Kaur and Ranjit Singh widened when the latter levied tribute on Adinanagar, under the Kanheyas, as she had all the while thought that her estate was beyond the Durbar's jurisdiction. Sada Kaur was sore also for the reason that Ranjit Singh had taken Raj Kaur as a wife which frustrated her design to see Mehtab Kaur wield influence on Ranjit Singh. A tenacious woman, she planned that the Maharaja should have an heir from her daughter Mehtab Kaur. She procured a boy during one of the Maharaja's expeditions and passed him off as her daughter's. But the child died shortly afterwards. 'Sada Kaur now decided to try the effect of twins'. When Ranjit Singh started on his cis-Sutlej expedition in 1807, she gave it out that Mehtab Kaur was pregnant and on the Maharaja's return presented him with twin sons. Ranjit Singh at first refused to have anything to do with the children. But the following year, when he was

almost at war with the British over the cis-Sutlej question, he conciliated his 'terrible' mother-in-law and acknowledged the boys as his own.

In 1808 at a meeting Metcalf stressed on Ranjit Singh that the Sutlej was the boundary line between the two states. Ranjit had only two courses open, either to give battle or negotiate further. Sada Kaur, who had always been for a bold policy, and Fakir Nizamuddin, the confidant of Ranjit Singh, counselled patience. To put pressure on the Sikh ruler, the British army under Ochterlony crossed the Jamuna (not Sutlej) and was greeted by the Malwa chiefs. "Sada Kaur, either playing for safety or playing a double game, also mounted the bandwagon."

Ranjit Singh forgave his mother-in-law out of gratitude for what she had done him in the beginning of his career. However, the breaking point reached when she refused to attend the marriage of Kharak Singh, the eldest son of Ranjit Singh from Raj Kaur, and forbade the twins (Mehtab Kaur had died) to attend the marriage. Earlier too she had annoyed the Maharaja by sending the boys to him with petitions for Jagir and protesting against giving Kharak Singh a bigger jagir. In 1810 Ranjit Singh communicated to her that she was quite aged (she was 72) and that it would be in the interest of the state if she formally gave her estate to her elder grandson. When persuasion failed, he had her imprisoned. She could not reconcile and sent a message to Ranjit Singh that she would prefer death to being deprived of the estate.

Sada Kaur was an ambitious woman. Her contribution would have been greater had she subordinated her personal interests to the larger interests of the Khalsa Durbar. It was unfortunate that she failed to see Ranjit Singh as a symbol of the Sikh nation. "It was unwise on her part to try to destroy the image she had done so much to build."

Khushwant Singh : *The History of the Sikhs*

Sir Lapal Griffin : *Ranjit Singh*

F.S. Moheeduddin : *The Real Ranjit Singh*

# Rani Rasmani

(1793-1861)

Rani Rasmnai is best known for the Dakshineswar temple she built. It was here that the chief priest of the temple, Gadadhar made spiritual attainments. Gadadhar became famous as Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Rani Rasmani thus provided a forum for spiritual regeneration.

Rasmani was born daughter of Harekishna Das, a so-called Shudra labourer, and Rampriya in Kona, a hamlet near Calcutta. The mother affectionately called her Rani, meaning a queen, and strange enough that stuck to her name Rasmani. When she was 11, one Rajachandra, son of a rich person of Howrah District saw her and was struck by her charm. Their marriage was arranged and solemnised.

Rasmani was a religious minded person and at her new home at Calcutta she lived a life of simplicity and piety. In 1817 her father-in-law died and Rajachandra became the owner of vast estates. In 1823 when floods played havoc, she gave food and shelter to a large number of homeless and destitute families. In 1836 her husband also passed away. They had three daughters, all married, but no male issue and the burden of managing the estates now fell on her. She was not indifferent to the secular interests of the family and looked after these with the assistance of her son-in-law, Mathuradas Biswas. 'Her charities and humanitarian activities became proverbial'. *She was devoted to human welfare and this at times brought her in conflict with the East India Company and the whitemen.*

Once the fishermen complained to her against the Company that it had levied tax on their fishing in the river. Rasmani took a lease of that portion of the Ganga from the Company for Rs. 10,000 and put up barriers across the river to obstruct the ingress and egress of boats and ships. The Co. took exception to this. But she was bold and told the Government that constant movement of the boats and ships in that

area disturbed the fish and caused loss of fishery to her tenants. The Co. yielded and permitted the fishermen to fish in the Ganga free of tax. She removed the obstructions.

Another time she taught an indigo planter a lesson. The news of oppression by Mr. Donald in an area forming part of her estates reached her. She sent a strong body of men to bring the planter to his senses. The planter approached the judiciary but the case against the Rani was dismissed.

In 1855 she built the Dakshineshwar temple. But no orthodox Brahmin would officiate as priest as she was a *shudra*. But then one Ramakumar Chattopadhyay, a learned Pundit solved her problem with an imaginative solution—she could donate the temple, and this she did. Ramakumar was appointed the priest of the Kali temple and on his death, his younger brother Gadadhar, later to be famous as Ramakrishna Paramhansa, was appointed the chief priest. In her later life she left the management to her son-in-law and devoted herself to the goddess. She respected all forms of worship.

In 1861 Rani Rasmani quietly passed away.

# Rani Lakshmi Bai

(1835-1858)

*Whatever her faults in British eyes may have been, her countrymen will ever remember that she was driven by ill treatment into rebellion, she lived and died for her country.*

—G.B. Malleson

Rani Lakshmi Bai (original name Manikarnika) was born daughter of Moropant Balwant Rao Tambe and Bhagirathi Bai on 16 November 1835 at Kashi. While she was still an infant, she lost her mother and was brought up by her father. Circumstances conspired and Moropant had to shift over to Bithur where Manikarnika grew up in the Peshwa's family. She was 'beautiful, intelligent, energetic and courageous'. She received traditional education, learnt horse riding and use of small arms. She came in close contact with Nana Sahib, Rao Sahib and Tatya Tope.

In 1842 Manikarnika was married to Raja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi. He named her Lakshmi Bai. They had a male child who died in infancy. He adopted Damodar Rao, a five-year old child, as son and shortly afterwards on 21 November, 1853 Gangadhar Rao also expired after nominating Lakshmi Bai as regent. She became deeply religious, led a simple and austere life and administered the state efficiently which endeared her to her subjects. But Lord Dalhousie did not agree to Damodar Rao's adoption and on the plea of lapse, he annexed Jhansi on 27 February 1854. She was given Raja's ornaments, the balance of the treasury and a small pension of Rs. 5,000 per month.

Rani Lakshmi Bai protested against the high handedness and appealed to the Governor General and the Court of Directors for justice to her adopted son. But it was of no avail. Dalhousie paid no heed and wrote, "the state which was a tributary and dependant held by grant from the British Government has reverted to that Government." She reacted

*'Mert Jhansi nahin dung'* (I will not surrender my Jhansi) and added that the people of the state did not desire to be made the subjects of the East India Company and wanted to remain her subject. She sent a mission to England but that too did not fetch any result. From that moment the queen looked for a chance for redressal of her grievances.

And the opportunity arrived soon. In 1857 the sepoys at Meerut revolted against the British. The agitation moved fast to Delhi, Lucknow and other places. Jhansi too witnessed an open rebellion on 5 June 1857. The next day the English took shelter in the city. On 7 June the Rani's adherents joined the rebellion. They released the prisoners, set fire to the kutchery, murdered officers they could lay their hands on and in the morning of 8 June attacked the fort. Unable to hold any longer, the British army surrendered on the condition that they would be allowed to leave Jhansi unmolested. But when the British army came out, the men of the enemy were seized and murdered. The 'rebels' supported the Rani and said, "The people are God's, the country is Padshah's and the Raj is Rani Lakshmi Bai's." She started governing Jhansi on behalf of her adopted son. Opinions differ about the complicity of the Rani in the rebellion, her share in actual occurrences, and in the massacre of Europeans besieged in the fort."

The 'rebels' left for Delhi and on 9 June, she issued orders to the officers of the state to carry on business as hitherto. Sadashiv Rao, a relation of her husband's and the Rani of Tehri contested her claim to Jhansi. Lakshmi Bai fought a battle against Sadashiv Rao, defeated and took him prisoner. Later the Rani of Tehri was also defeated.

Rani Lakshmi Bai tried to handle the situation with caution. In a letter to the British she professed loyalty to the British Government. But this was not even acknowledged. She combined in her person the quality of a warrior and a statesman and set about performing her duties with caution and speed. She wrote letters to other Rajas and chiefs, including Nana Sahib, asking them to save their faith and sacrifice everything for its sake. By March 1858 she had 15000 men in her service. She repaired the old guns and had new ones manufactured. Some historians read in her a wavering—whether to fight the British or be with them.



The British force, under the command of Sir Hugh Rose, laid siege on 20 March. The Rani sent out messages to her men in the district to repair to the town. The houses near the city wall were vacated, two guns were set on there and ammunition was distributed to the army. The Rani's troops showed undaunted courage and returned shot for shot. She inspired her soldiers by her presence and speech. Even women came forward and gave a helping hand in carrying ammunition to the army. Unfortunately on 28 March the shells fired by the enemy fell into the Fort which blew up the gun powder and caused considerable damage to the building. Within the next three days one hundred of her men were killed. Realising her weak position, the Rani with her adopted son escaped on horse back under the cover of darkness. She was hotly pursued by the British army. But she succeeded in joining Tantia Tope at Kalpi and fought a series of battles. On 23 May she vacated Konch and Kalpi and proceeded towards Gwalior which fell without a blow on 4 June to the 'rebels'. Gwalior troops joined them and the town now became a rebel centre.

The English forces under Rose and Napier proceeded to Gwalior and defeated Tope at Morar. Lakshmi Bai on hearing of the advance of the British troops mounted the horse to give a battle but by now the European soldiers had surrounded her. She received a cut on the left eye brow, another on the left hand and a ball pierced her rightside. She fell from the horse. Her soldiers gave her some water to drink but she, 'the bravest and the best military leader of the rebels could not survive the bullet wound and died' on 16 June. Damodar Rao performed her last rites in a nearby garden.

Rani Lakshmi Bai's stance inspired Indians in their fight for freedom against the British.

# Begum Hazrat Mahal

(—1879)

Begum Hazrat Mahal, wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh, was another prominent leader who actively participated in the country's First War of Independence. The Oudh family had been provoked to join the anti-British rebels because they had been betrayed by the East India Company. Only nine years back the Company had annexed their state and pensioned off the Nawab. While the Nawab and some near relatives left for Calcutta, the Begum stayed back at Lucknow. And, when on May 30, 1857, the discontented people of Oudh raised the banner of revolt against the foreigners and placed the 10-year old prince Mirza Birjis Qadar on the throne with Hazarat Mahal as the regent, she gathered the forces and tried to rule the state. She exercised the authority, showed qualities of leadership and statesmanship, and appointed Hindus and Muslims to the high offices of the state.

But Hazrat Mahal was not fated to rule the state for long. From Kanpur, the British army reached Lucknow and on 23 September 1857, after a few encounters, succeeded in occupying Alambagh. Two days later they reached the besieged garrison in Residency. She saw her army was diffident. She exhorted her officers, "*The whole army is in Lucknow, but it is without courage. Why does it not attack Alambagh?*" She appeared on an elephant on the battle field on 25 February 1858. This inspired the sepoys who vigorously attacked Alambagh. She availed of every opportunity and ordered the occupation of Benares and Allahabad and marched on Azamgarh and Jaunpur.

On 2 March the British started operation with a big force but Hazrat Mahal did not lose heart. She went about the battle field inspiring her troops and held on Lucknow till 19 March 1858. Later, she reinforced Maulvi Ahmedullah Shah in his attack on Shahjahanpur. But the soldiers got panicky

and began to desert her. When her position became precarious the Begum, her son Birjis Qadir and a few followers escaped to Nepal and accepted asylum from the Nepalese Government, though reluctantly. The British authorities offered her terms for surrender. They assured her of "all the consideration which is due to her as a member of a royal house, but political powers she shall never have, and she will do wisely to secure by prompt submission a generous treatment and an honourable position for the rest of her life."

Hazrat Mahal knew enough about the British promises and rather than surrender to them, she in vain requested the Nepal Government to give her armed assistance.

When Queen Victoria issued proclamation to appease the people, the Begum issued a counter proclamation. She challenged the truth and sincerity of the promises made by the Queen of England and warned the people not to have faith in them. 'Faith is the unvarying curtain of the English and also never to forgive a fault, be it great or small', she added.

Hazrat Mahal did not surrender to the British authorities. The Nepal Government granted her a small allowance of Rs. 400/- per month. "It is said that she presented all her jewellery to the Nepal Government." After about two decades, she sought permission of the British authorities to go to India but her request was turned down. In 1879 the brave queen Hazrat Mahal died in Nepal.

"It is alleged that Hazrat Mahal, surnamed Istikhar-un-nisa, came of a poor family of Faizabad but her talents and record belie this presumption." In addition to being gifted with irresistible physical charm, she had an in-born genius for organisation and command. Though primarily trained in music and dancing, it appears that she received customary education after her arrival in the royal harem."

Also connected with '1857-Mutiny' was Zinat Mahal, queen of Bahadur Shah, the last Moghul emperor of Delhi. It was she who tried for her son to be named as successor and successfully provoked the king to side with the rebels. And, when the game was over, she accompanied her husband to Rangoon where they were imprisoned.

Abdul Halim Shara : *Lacknow : The last phase of an Oriental Culture*

# Toru Dutt

(1856-1877)

*Fragile blossom she was  
A rose-bud half unfurled  
Filling the little world  
Of her Indian home with fragrance.*

—Harihar Das

Toru Dutt so affectionately described in the above lines was a prodigy. At a tender age she started writing and by 21 she had written substantial prose and poetry in English and French. Edmund Gosse, a critic, wrote : 'The poetess seems to be chanting to herself those songs of her mother's race to which she always turned with tears of pleasure' and believed that 'when the history of English literature of our country comes to be written there is sure to be a page dedicated to her'.

Toru, the third child of Govin Chander Dutt and Chhetramani of Calcutta, was born on 4 March 1856. She had her education at home and later in France and the United Kingdom. At Cambridge she attended lectures for women and elsewhere in the United Kingdom and in France she met quite some important personages. The family returned to India in 1873. After sometime, unfortunately, her elder brother Abju and sister Aru, both died young, which shocked the parents and the young poetess.

Toru translated French poetry and prose into English, some of which appeared in the *Bengal Magazine*. Sometime later she wrote a novel *Le Journal de Mlle D'Arves*, on which a Dutch reviewer commented, 'Nothing in the book betrays the fact that the writer was a foreigner'. She also wrote an English novel, *Binaca, the Young Spanish Maiden*.

Toru wrote about her own life in letters to Marya, a girl friend, in the United Kingdom. These letters reveal her frankness, sensibility and simplicity. In 1876 she asked Malle Clarisse Bader for permission to translate her book '*La Femme*

*dans l'Inde* into English. The permission was given but before its receipt on 30 August 1877 Toru had passed away.

E.J. Thomas wrote, "Toru remains one of the most astonishing women that ever lived, a woman whose place is with Sappho and Emily Bronte, fiery and unconquerable of soul as they!" Her posthumous work *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* was a pioneering effort.

James Darmesteter, a distinguished French critic, observed, "This daughter of Bengal, so admirably and so strangely gifted, Hindu by race and tradition, an English woman by education, a French woman at heart, poet in English, prose-writer in French, who at the age of eighteen made India acquainted with the poets of France in the rhyme of England, who blended in herself three souls and three traditions, and died at the age of twenty (actually 21), in the full bloom of her talent and on the eve of the awakening of her genius, presents in the history of literature a phenomenon without parallel."

Padmini Sen Gupta : *Toru Dutt*

# Pandita Ramabai

(1858-1922)

Pandita Ramabai was born in 1858 daughter of Anant Shastri Dongre, a scholarly Brahmin who had been outcast for teaching Sanskrit to his wife Lakshmibai and lived in the forests of Gangamul, in western Maharashtra. While Ramabai was yet a child, the family consisting of the parents, two daughters and a son, forced by wily relatives, moved out. For years, Anant Shastri eked out a living by working as a Puranik.

Ramabai was imbued with thirst for learning and at a very young age she became proficient in Sanskrit and by 12 she could recite as many as 20,000 *shlokas*

Persecuted by the society, the Dongre couple and their elder daughter died tragic deaths in 1876. Ramabai was left with her younger brother Srinivas to face the wide world. The two moved from place to place. She learnt a great deal about the condition of women in India and became an ardent champion of women's education. In 1878 she came to Calcutta where she was acclaimed for her speech in Sanskrit as 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati'. Two years later in 1880 she lost her brother and now she had none in the world to call her own.

In the meantime Bipin Behari Das Medhavi, a non-Brahmin pleader of Bengal, took keen interest in her. The two were married much to the dislike of orthodox Hindus. They were happy to beget a daughter whom they named Manorama. But the happiness was short lived, as Bipin Behari Das also died a premature death.

Again left alone in the world, Ramabai went to Poona. There she came in contact with social reformers and Christian missionaries. With the help of reformers like Ranade and Bhandarkar, she founded the Arya Mahila Samaj with the avowed object of delivering the high caste women from ignorance and social and religious evils. On her own, she tendered evidence before a commission set up by the Government to

enquire into the problem of education in India. She suggested training of women as inspectresses and doctors.

Pandita Ramabai learnt English and made friends with a missionary whose assistance enabled her, in 1883, to go to London for further study. There she was baptised as a Christian. In 1886 she went to the U.S.A. on a lecture tour. The people were so much impressed by her that at Boston they organised a Ramabai Association. The members of the Association agreed to contribute funds for setting up a High Caste Widow Home in India. In 1889, she returned to India and started Sharda Sadan at Bombay to give shelter to the destitute high caste widows. Many high caste girls and persecuted young widows joined the Sadan for receiving education. But when some conversions took place, she was criticised by many, including Tilak. This affected the institution and she therefore shifted the venue of her activities to Poona.

Later when famine struck the Central Provinces, Ramabai went over in the interior and rescued 600 helpless young girls and admitted them to the Sharda Sadan. Again when bubonic plague broke out in Poona she shifted young girls to Kedgaon where she had earlier purchased a 100-acre plot of land. The place became famous as Mukti Sadan. In 1900 she did a great deal to alleviate human suffering in Gujarat where a famine had struck. Many young women joined her and the population of Mukti Sadan increased to 1900.

Years 1920 to 1922 saw Ramabai's mission fulfilled in diverse ways. An ardent supporter to women's cause, she set up Kripa Sadan for the fallen women. Her constructive genius shone out brilliantly and workers and visitors from all over the world came to visit the centres she had set up.

On 5 April 1922 Pandita Ramabai passed away.

# Sharada Devi

(1853-1920)

*"If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others, rather see your own faults."* —Holy Mother

Sharada Devi, like her husband Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is known for her spiritual attainments. Once Ramakrishna accepted her as a spiritual guide and offered ritualistic homage at her feet.

Sharada Devi was born of poor Brahmin parents, Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay and Shyamasundari Devi of Jayarambati, in the Bankura district of West Bengal, on 22 December 1853. At the age of 6, she was married to Gadadhar, of Kamarpukur, a neighbouring village, who later became famous as Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Theirs was a unique wedlock; both the partners observed life long celibacy.

After marriage, Sharada continued living with her parents, while Gadadhar lived at Calcutta. He was unworldly and people would say that he was insane. This disturbed Sharada. Her doubts were set at rest when she went to meet Ramakrishna and he talked to her about the divine purpose of life and the path to reach the goal. Through him, she felt 'a divine presence radiating purity and peace'.

In early 1872 Sharada Devi again visited Dakshineswar where she was warmly received by her husband. One day he asked her whether she had come there to drag him down to the worldly plane. Her reply was, "No, I am here to serve you so that you may go ahead on your chosen path." His closeness helped her to discern the beatitude of spiritual life and to see that sublimation stood for. Yearnings of flesh and carnal desire had no place in their relationship. Once Ramakrishna spoke about it. "Had she been of a different nature and come upon me like an avalanche of passion, I don't know how far I would have drifted".

*In the company of Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi also*



sometime went into *samadhi*. In 1886 Ramakrishna passed away and though distraught, she bore her sorrow with courage. She now faced financial difficulties but even in straitened situations, she never lost her heart. Fortunately, the disciples looked after her and she passed most of her time in pilgrimages.

Sharada Devi ministered to the spiritual needs of the people. She initiated many disciples and advised them, "If you want peace immediately, practice the spiritual disciplines prescribed. Otherwise you will achieve it only at the fall of body". In 1889 she consecrated Belur Math and saw elsewhere Ramakrishna Ashramas coming up. She cared for the inmates of the *maths* like a mother and her heart melted at people's misery. She was sympathetic towards those who had gone stray from correct path and observed. "If my child gets covered with mud or dust, is it not my duty to cleanse him and take him in my lap". She made no distinction of sex, caste, community or nationality so long as the individual was sincere.

In 1913, Sharada Devi performed *Panchatan* after which people started addressing her as "Holy Mother".

Sharada Devi was unassuming. Rather than taking credit for a thing, she always ascribed it to Divine grace. Her disciples looked upto her as Divinity in blood and flesh. It has been said that though a wife, she was a nun, though not actually a mother, she was a living mother to innumerable children, and though aloof from the world, she was an ideal householder.

On 20 July 1920 Sharada Devi "left this physical world".

# Madame Bhikaiji Cama

(1861-1936)

*We are peaceful, we do not want a bloody revolution but we do want to teach the people their rights and throw off despotism.*

—Cama

Bhikaiji Cama was the first Indian to unfurl abroad her country's tri colour flag (green, yellow and red) inscribed with the words Vande Mataram. This she did at the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, in Germany, on 18 August 1907. On this occasion, she explained her avowed object to expose the tyrannous British rule in India, and to establish contacts with other revolutionaries, she sent to her friends in India revolvers, concealed as toys, as present which could, in time of need, be used to liberate the country from the foreign yoke.

Bhikaiji was born daughter of Framji Sorabji Patel, a Parsi businessman, of Bombay on 24 September 1861. At a young age she was married to Mr. K.R. Cama, a leading solicitor. But she forsake the comfortable life so as to devote herself to social and political work. In 1902 when she went abroad to recoup her health, she exploited various forums to present her country's case before foreign audiences. She propagated her thoughts through the *Vande Mataram*, a newspaper, she started. She visited the United States of America and a few European countries to seek help for her country's emancipation. In England, she worked for Dadabhoy Naoroji's election to the British Parliament. Madame Cama wanted her countrymen, especially the youth, to participate in the struggle for India's freedom. To them, her message was "March forward friends and lead the helpless, dying, down-trodden children of the motherland to the goal of *swaraj* in its right sense." She exhorted Indians to unite and to refuse offices in the British Government. Her activities attracted the attention of the government who kept a watch over her. Finding that it was no longer safe to work in U.K., she moved to Paris.

Soon after the first World War started and she was interned. Even after the War was over, she was not allowed to return to India and had to remain in exile for many years. Only when her health shattered, she was allowed in 1935 to return to her country.

Madame Cama's ideal was, "India must be united". Although she did not live long to see her country independent, she witnessed a vigorous movement for her country's freedom. On 30 August 1936 she breathed her last at Bombay.

# Kasturba Gandhi

(1869-1944)

The women of India as a whole should honour 'one, who by her race, qualities of courage, devotion and self-sacrifice has so signally justified and fulfilled the high traditions of Indian womanhood', wrote Sarojini Naidu about Kasturba Gandhi.

Kasturba was born in a middle class family of Porbandar in 1869. At the tender age of 13 she was married to Mohandas who was later to be famous as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or 'Bapu' and she herself as 'Ba'.

Gandhi after his education in London tried to settle down as a lawyer but in this he proved a failure. To try his luck abroad, he left for South Africa. Kasturba followed him. Gandhi tried to mobilise Indians but he did not like involving Kasturba in this. So when he started his Phoenix programme, he did not inform her about it. She resented and asked him, 'Do you observe any defect in me that may disqualify me from going to jail. I wish to take the path to which you are inviting others.' Gandhi's reply 'It should not appear as if you went to jail at my instance', could not detract her. She assured him 'You may have nothing to do with me if being unable to stand jail I secure my release by an apology. If you can endure hardships and so can my boys, why can't I? I am bound to join the struggle.' She joined the movement and hereafter she was always at the side of her husband. Kasturba was a companion in joy as well as sorrow.

On return to India, she continued working with her husband. In the twenties when Gandhiji intensified his programme, Kasturba presided over meetings and toured various states and propagated for the success of the Satyagraha. Once presiding over the Gujarat Provincial Congress, she condemned untouchability and preached the use of Swadeshi. She appealed to women to take to spinning Khadi. "If we want to earn

Swaraj", she said, "we shall have to fill the bowl of goddess of freedom." When it was reported to her that her son Devadas Gandhi had been arrested, she said, "Only two sons of mine have gone to jail, but twenty thousand sons of mother India are in jail; how can I bemoan my lot. Young sons of mother India ! prosecute the work of Khaddar with such zeal that you may either regain your brothers or join them in jail."

In 1922 Kasturba presided over the first women's meeting of Punjab. She participated in Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and Quit India Movement (1942). In 1942, she was arrested on 9 August alongwith Gandhi and several others. She was imprisoned in the Aga Khan Palace in Poona.

On 23 February 1944 at the age of 74, Kasturba died in the Aga Khan Palace, leaving behind her saintly husband, sons and grandsons and innumerable persons for whom she had come to be a mother figure.

She had borne ungrudgingly her husband's fads but did not live long to see his dream of independence come true. She set an example of tolerance and fortitude and seeing her, a simple homely woman, many women were drawn in the battle of independence.

# Sarojini Naidu

(1879-1949)

'A brilliant orator, great poet, a person endowed with unusual charm and sense of humour as well as a genius in oratory, administrative skills and popular leadership'—Obituary in the Gazette of India Extraordinary on Sarojini Naidu.

Sarojini was the eldest daughter of Varada Sundari and Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, a Bengali gentleman in Nizam's service at Hyderabad. She was born on 13 February 1879. She grew up as one of a 'very fanciful and dreamy nature,' wrote poetry and at the age of 12 passed her matriculation examination, standing on the top of list of successful candidates from Madras Presidency.

Sarojini was of a weak constitution and had to discontinue her studies. But after four years, in 1895, on a scholarship from Nizam she went to the U.K. Within the next three years she wrote prolifically, especially on Indian themes.

In 1898 Sarojini returned to India without taking any degree and was the same year married, at Madras, to Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu of Hyderabad. She was a Bengali Brahmin and Naidu an Andhra of a different caste. This was a rare inter-provincial inter-caste marriage. The couple settled down at Hyderabad and had four children, one of whom Padmaja, was to be the Governor of West Bengal. They built a house and named it the 'Golden Threshold' after one of her poems.

Sarojini's books of poems started appearing from 1905 and were well received. The books she wrote are : The Golden Threshold (1905). The Bird of Time, Songs of Life, and Death and the Spring (1912), and the Broken Wing (1917).

Sarojini's poetry has been criticised as 'unsubstantial' and of the moment and sight. But this had to be so because of her involvement in politics. Yet her poetry is read with interest even today. Gandhi called Sarojini, the Bharat

Kokila, the Nightingale of India and she called Gandhi 'Mickey Mouse'. She was considered by some critics to be the most accomplished poet of India writing in English and, few could match her wit, humour, sarcasm and satire.

After settling down at Hyderabad, Sarojini started taking keen interest in social work and in 1905 she plunged in politics. She attended Congress conferences and spoke on National Freedom, Emancipation of Women, Youth of India, and Hindu-Muslim Unity. In 1911 for her services to the community, she was awarded the Kaiser-e-Hind gold medal and next year she was made a member of the Royal Society of Literature. In London she met Gandhi through Gokhale and their friendship never wavered.

About women, Sarojini reprimanded her countrymen: "You talk of Indian womanhood, you talk of courage and devotion and took Savitri to the very realms of death to win back her husband's soul, yet to the Savitris of today you deny that power to win back the national life."

Sarojini criticised the Jallianwala incident and the Rowalatt Bill and Martial Law. In 1922, with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad she brought about a truce between the Congress and the Swaraj Party. In 1925 she was elected as the President of the All India Congress Committee which met in Kanpur.

Thrice Sarojini was imprisoned for her participation in the freedom struggle. This was in 1930, 1932 and 1942. On 8 August 1942 Gandhi delivered his Quit India speech at Bombay. The next day large number of leaders were arrested. Gandhi, Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and a few others were imprisoned at the Aga Khan Palace at Poona. On 21 March 1943 she was unconditionally released because of her illness. In March 1947 she presided over the Asian Relations Conference, and, on Independence Day, on 15 August 1947 she was sworn in as the Governor of U.P.—the first woman to be Governor in independent India.

On 2 March 1949 she breathed her last after a short illness.

# Amrita Shergil

(1913-1941)

*'I liked your pictures because they showed so much strength and perception. How different these pictures were from the pasty-faced efforts that one sees so frequently in India'. —Jawaharlal Nehru to Amrita Shergil, one of India's most renowned artists.*

Amrita Shergil was born daughter of Sardar Umrao Singh Majithia, a scholar Sikh nobleman, and Antonette, a reputed Hungarian musician and opera singer, at Budapest on 30 January 1913. The family returned to India in 1921 and settled at Simla where Amrita received her early education. The parents observed that their daughter was interested in drawing and painting and with a view to providing best opportunities for the development of her talents, they took her to Florence, in Italy, for training in arts. She joined a school there but was expelled for drawing nude women. In 1924 she came back to India. She was deeply impressed by her surroundings and took themes from these.

In 1929 the family moved to Paris and Amrita worked under well known artists, Mr. Pierre Vaillant and Prof. Lucien Simon of Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts whom she impressed. Prof. Simon was a perceptive teacher and told her, 'One day I shall be proud that you have been my pupil'. She was at the Ecole for three years. In 1934 her painting 'Young Girls' was adjudged as the picture of the year and she, the youngest ever for the honour, was elected as Associate of the Grand Salon. She was the first Indian, in fact the first Asian, to achieve this distinction. The same year she returned with her parents to India.

In India Amrita participated in art exhibitions held at Simla, Delhi and Bombay and won several prizes. The Bombay exhibition of 1938 brought her unprecedented appreciation.

Amrita visited Ajanta-Ellora and many other places in



South India which influenced her. It was on way back at Delhi that she organised an exhibition and it was there that Jawaharlal Nehru complimented her. She put down on canvas her impressions of South India and her genius flowered in the South Indian Trilogy viz., The Brahmacharis, The Bride's Toilet, and South Indian Villagers going to the market.

In 1937 Amrita put up at Lahore her one-man exhibition of 30 paintings. The next year she painted *Siesta*, *The Story Teller*, *Ganesh Puja*, *Hillside*, *Hill Scene*, *Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool* etc. with decorative motifs, although colour continued to be her forte. She said, 'Colour is my domain and I am on terms of easy domination with it'.

In 1938 Amrita was married to her cousin Dr. Victor Egan at Budapest. The couple came to India and tried to settle at Simla but found itself in financial difficulties. They moved to Lahore but even this did not solve their problem. Amrita did quite a few paintings at Lahore.

At the age of 28 on 5 December 1941 Amrita passed away after a short illness.

Amrita Shergil liberated Indian art for which she has become a legend.

**Foreigners**

# Sister Nivedita

(1867-1911)

"If today's youth is inspired with a burning passion for a better superior and nobler life, the credit for this should go largely to the lady who has been so prematurely called away from us," lamented the Indians on the demise of a foreign lady named Margret Noble.

Popularly known as Sister Nivedita, Margret took up the cause of India's freedom as her mission and women's education as her passion.

Margret Nable was born daughter of Rev S.R. Noble at Duganarce Tyrone on 28 October 1867. She started her career as a teacher. But In 1895 when she came in contact with Swami Vivekananda, the latter's high ideals influenced her. Three years later she came to India. She was touched by the misery of the Indian people. After sometime she met Aurobindo, then striving for revolution and became an active member of the National Revolutionary Council of India.

Sister Nivedita condemned the observations about India and Indians made by Curzon. In 1906 when famine and floods caused great suffering to the people of East Bengal, Sister Nivedita made all out efforts to help them. Next year when Bhupendra Nath Dutta, younger brother of Swami Vivekananda and editor of Yugantar, was arrested on a charge [of sedition, she came forward and stood surety for him. This invited on her the wrath of the alien rulers. But she was fearless and continued with her efforts for India's freedom.

In 1911 after a brief illness, Sister Nivedita breathed her last.

# Anne Besant

(1847-1933)

The Home Rule movement of Anne Besant was the precursor of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. She made Indian politics a living and vital issue.

Anne was born, in 1847 in London, daughter of Dr. William Page, an Irish. At the age of 5 she lost her father and the family faced hard time. In 1861 she moved to Paris to be with one Miss Maryat, a religious minded person. The Parisian owned a good library of which Anne made good use. This laid foundation of her political life.

At the age of 20, Anne married Mr. Frank Besant, a clergy. But their temperaments differed and rather than live in constant friction, she sought divorce. She took up various jobs to support herself. In 1874 she joined the *National Reform* and shortly afterwards joined Madame Blavatsky's 'Theosophical Society' and next year she moved to India.

Mrs. Besant devoted herself to the social reforms. She opened schools and colleges and engendered love amongst people for Aryan simplicity and spirituality. She preached *Swadeshi* and raised voice against casteism. At the 1913 Congress session, she espoused the cause of India's national movement which was to embody religious, educational, social and political reforms. She started a weekly '*Commonwealth*' and a daily '*New Premier*'. She mooted the idea of Home Rule and asked the British Government to promise India self government as a right and not as reward for the loyalty of Indians during the war. She made it clear that the struggle was for liberty within the empire and not against Great Britain, the Home Rule was necessary for the self respect and dignity of a people, and freedom was the birth right of every nation. She added that under the Empire, India's interests were made subservient and her resources not utilised even for her greater needs.

All this was not to the liking of the Government and to curb her activities, they asked her to furnish security for her paper. Not only that her entry in Bombay and Central Province was prohibited but in 1917 she was arrested also. People in India as well as abroad protested against this and the British Government was forced to announce some reforms. The Indians were to be increasingly associated with administration and self-governing institutions. On release, Mrs. Besant criticised these as half-measures. She was deeply interested in the progress of women and joined a deputation led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu that called on Mr. Montague, Secretary of State to ask for political rights for women. Though cradled in West, by choice and adoption she identified herself with Indians. In 1917 she founded the Indian Boys Scouts Association.

The same year Mrs. Besant was elected to the highest office—the President of the Congress. This was the greatest honour India could bestow on her.

Mrs. Besant was opposed to Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and characterised it as a revolt. This made her unpopular even amongst the members of the Home Rule League. Later she went to England to propagate the cause of India's freedom. She vented her feelings against the setting up of Simon Commission with only Englishmen as its members. In 1928 she attended the All-Party Conference.

Mrs. Besant passed away in 1933. She inspired India's men and women to realise their own freedom.

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# The Mother of Pondicherry

(1878-1973)

The mother of Pondicherry was born daughter of Maurice and Mathilde Alfassa at Paris on 21st February 1878. She was a prodigy and from her very childhood showed remarkable perception. In 1904 she had a vision of Sri Aurobindo. Ten years later, she saw him physically at Pondicherry and at once recognised him.

She felt drawn to India and said, 'From the first time I came to India, I felt that India is my true country, the country of my soul and spirit.'

In 1923 she came to India for good and six years later The Sri Aurobindo Ashram began to take shape. Till 17 November 1973, when she passed away, the Mother held materil and spiritual charge of the Ashram and the Auroville.

Sri Aurobindo and The Mother resarched on 'transformation of matter' through supermind with the object of leading mankind towards universal harmony and even 'evolutionary mutation of man into a supramental gnostic being.'

**Mentioned**

## MISCELLANY

### *Janabai*

Jani was the daughter of Dama and Karund, a poor peasant family of Gangakheda in Maharashtra. Once the family went to Pandharpur to visit the deity Vithoba. Jani stayed on and accepted the job of a servant in the family of tailor Damashetti. The latter's son Namadeva, who latter became famous as a saint, composed *abhangas* and his other family members also made efforts. But surprisingly *abhangas* of Jani, who imagined of herself being in constant company of Lord Vithoba, excelled efforts of others. Her *abhangas* find place in the daily prayers (*bhajans*) of Varakaris, a sect in Maharashtra.

### *Mriganayana* (15-16th C)

Mriganayana, wife of Raja Man Singh of Gwalior, said to be 'lovelier than Urvashi' possessed a special taste for *Sankirna ragas* (or mixed modes) of Indian music. Four specimens of her compositions namely Gujarī, Babul Gujarī, Mal Gujarī and Mangal Gujarī have survived.

### *Molla* (16th C)

Molla, daughter of Keshav Sethi, a potter of Gopavaram, is the authoress of Telugu Ramayana. Her poem is a work of considerable merit. Her style is charming, verse easy flowing and pen portraits superb.

### *Khana*

Khana is famous for her Bengali proverbs and sayings about agriculture, astrology, morals etc. Tradition makes her daughter of Varaha and wife of Mihira, thus associating her with the name of the famous astronomer Varahmihira, which is improbable.

Kanti, Oduva Tirumalamba, Tarigonda Vengamamba and Honamma are also well known for their writings.